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# GRETCHEN.

A Novel.

By "RITA,"

AUTHOR OF "THE LADYE NANCYE," ETC.

*THIRD EDITION.*

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# GRETCHEN.

## Book I.

### CHAPTER I.

#### I AM NOT WANTED BY ANYBODY.

"LISSCHEN, Lisschen! Are you asleep, Lisschen?"

There was no answer. The wind rustled softly among murmuring leaves. Here and there a bird twittered lazily in the dreamy noontide hush. That was all—that, and the sound of placid breathing here in the heart of the dark, deep woods that clothed the pretty heights around Neu-Waldegg.

That little village, and its sister Dornbach, were quite shut out from sight. Trees, tall and short, old and young, large and slender, grew close and thick along the sloping hills and level park-lands; trees that were clothed now in the rich and lovely leafage of spring, and shut out the hot sun with depths of cool, dim shadow.

A little stream ran swiftly under a tiny, toy-like bridge—a little span of shallow water, that caught the sunbeams' radiance through swaying boughs, and in which the little children came to bathe their bare brown limbs, and by whose banks the old wood-gatherers sat to rest and chatter. But even the little stream was quiet to-day; its lulling song was subdued. The drowsy hush of the hour seemed to have cast its spell over everything, save those bright, girlish eyes,

wandering from place to place, and glancing with comical dissatisfaction at the sleeping figure on the grassy bank beside her.

Yes, Lisschen was asleep. She had fallen under the spell to which the birds, and the butterflies, and the shallow, murmuring waters, had succumbed.

Her knitting had fallen from her hand; her head lay back against the soft turf. The grim, hard-featured face had lost something of its grimness and hardness, for Sleep, like its twin-sister, Death, has a marvellous way of smoothing out the lines and creases of the human visage, and bestowing upon it that serenity and quiet content which give a kind of beauty to even the homeliest or the most forlorn.

"Poor old Lisschen!" the girl murmured softly, "she doesn't look so cross when she is asleep. I wonder if she was always cross, even when she was young. Fancy Lisschen ever being young, though! I can't imagine it. Her face is as gnarled, and brown, and wrinkled as an old tree stem, and her hands look like leather. It doesn't seem possible that she could ever have been pleasant and fair, like the girls one sees. Now, I wonder how long she intends to sleep?"

She clasped her hands behind her head—such a pretty, uncovered head it was—and leant back lazily, looking up through the green boughs to where the haze of sunshine burnt in the sky, watching the filmy clouds as they crossed it in a soft, slow measure, from space to space of the blue width of heaven.

"It is stupid lying idle here and doing nothing," she went on. "I have half a mind to wake Lisschen and make her talk, only she'll be so cross."

"Don't wake her, then," murmured a voice near by—a lazy, pleasant voice, with just a little uncertainty in its accent that seemed to give a distinct charm to the guttural German. "Don't wake her come up here and talk to me."

The girl did not start, unexpected as was the intrusion; she only unclasped her hands, and turned her head in the direction of the speaker. Doing so she caught the outline of a figure stretched on the

grass a few yards off, and rather above the level of her own resting-place.

"Are you coming?" resumed the voice a little plaintively. "I can't see you; I am blind."

The girl rose to her feet with a slow, uncertain grace, and looked up curiously at the speaker.

The figure told her nothing, except that a man was lying on the bank, his face almost hidden, and the upper part bound by a black silk handkerchief. Some vague sense of pity and curiosity stole across her heart. She did not speak, but went slowly up the slope and stood before the stranger.

"Was I talking aloud?" she asked him softly. "I did not know."

The recumbent figure raised itself at the sound of her voice. She saw then that the smooth face and finely moulded chin, and down-shaded upper lip, bespoke youth, and the sight of the disfiguring bandage touched her heart with new compassion.

"And are you really blind?" she asked. "And all alone? Are you not afraid of losing yourself in the woods?"

A smile curved the handsome mouth under shade of the fair, faint moustache.

"I expect my servant back presently," he said. "He only went down to the Restauration. I, too, fell asleep like—Lisschen. By the way, who is Lisschen?"

"Hush," said the girl softly. "You will wake her, and then she will be cross. She is almost always cross."

"What an extremely pleasant old person!" he answered, lowering his voice, though, at the girl's hint. "I will try and not wake her, as you give her so bad a character. I presume she is old and—and otherwise estimable. Is she your nurse?"

"Nurse!" the girl laughed softly. "Oh, no. I am not so young as all that. In fact, I am quite grown up. I shall soon be sixteen. Oh, no! Lisschen is our servant. She is quite old; she was old when I was a baby. She came here with me from Dornbach to-day. I live there."

"So," he said tranquilly. "I, too, live at Dornbach—for the present. I came to Vienna for advice about my eyes. They are getting better at last. But the city was so hot I really could not bear it, so I have taken rooms at Dornbach for a month. By that time I hope my sight will be quite restored; the oculist believes now that it will."

"How glad you will be!" she said softly. "It must be terrible not to see. Fancy life without the sky and the sun, and all the beautiful things of earth! I think I would rather die."

"I thought so, too," he said gloomily. "At first, when they said there was hope, I dared not believe them. I have suffered greatly both in body and mind."

"You are not—German?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Oh, no! I am English. I was at school in Bonn for many years; that is how I learnt the language. Then I went home and passed for the army."

"You are a soldier, then?"

"Yes. But I wish you would sit down; you have been standing all this time."

"How do you know that?" she questioned. "You cannot see."

A faint smile quivered over the young man's mouth.

"Have you never heard, Fräulein, that when a man loses one sense, Nature kindly strives to atone for that loss by sharpening those that are left? The sound of your voice tells me you are standing up."

She seated herself on the bank. The sunbeams were playing at hide-and-seek among the boughs. Below them, with her head comfortably pillowed on the soft turf, the old serving-woman slept placidly on. Now and then through the close ranks of the trees could be seen the bent figure or fluttering petticoats of a wood picker, with her bundle of sticks on her back.

It was dusky as evening under this green shade, and sometimes through the fern and bracken a rabbit peeped, or a bird rustled its wings for flight.

"Do you know," said the girl, suddenly breaking

the silence, "I have never been to Wien, though I live so near."

"That is strange," he answered. "Why don't your parents take you?"

"I have none," she said sadly. "I live with my grandfather and Tante. I remember nothing of my parents. They are angry at home when I speak of them. Lisschen says my mother was foolish and offended grandfather, and he has never forgiven her. She died, and left me a little baby. Tante brought me home—here, and I have lived here ever since. That is all my history."

"And your father. Did he die also?"

"Yes. That is all they have ever told me of him."

"Are they old people—these relations of yours?"

"Grandfather is old, but aunt is not, and she is beautiful still—but Lisschen says my mother was more beautiful. They were twin sisters, and so very, very fond of one another. Sometimes I wonder why, if she loved my mother so dearly, she cannot love me a little. But I know she does not. She is very, very good, so is grandfather. They are always going to church, and they give so much to the priests. The priests come very often to our house; no one else comes. But this will not interest you. I forget—I have so seldom any one to speak to, or who cares to hear me speak."

There was such a ring of pathos in the clear young voice, that it touched her auditor deeply.

"Indeed, I am much interested," he said. "Pray tell me all about yourself. I too am very lonely. I have no one to care about me very nearly, except an uncle. My parents died when I was a child. You see, there is a bond of sympathy between us already."

"Well," said the girl, dropping her voice to even softer tones, "perhaps, then, you can understand something of what I feel—not so much, of course, for you are a man, and men are so different. They have things to fill their life and interest them, and take their thoughts away from just—themselves. We haven't. Even Tante says that, and I—how can I

explain?—you can't understand what it is to seem in every one's way; not to be wanted or cared for, or needed by any living soul. I have been like that always—always. I often wonder why it is. Do you think you could tell me?"

"I certainly cannot," he answered gravely. "Because I can't imagine that a girl who is fair, and young, and innocent, and charming—as you must be—can fail to win love wherever she brings the sunshine of her presence."

"That," she said gravely, "is very pretty and very kind of you to say, but then you have never seen me, and you do not know me; you cannot, therefore, judge. I must be disagreeable or repulsive, because if I were not they would be kinder, or care for me more. I have grown weary of trying to make them love me. The priest always says to me, 'Patience, my child, patience, it will all come round in Heaven's good time.' But I think," she added drearily, "that it is Heaven's *long* time."

"Poor child!" said the sympathising voice beside her.

She glanced quickly at him, and then went on, her little, slender hands plucking nervously at the daisies which grew amongst the blades of grass.

"I think, often and often, that my mere presence makes them unhappy; it recalls something—I don't know what, and no one has ever told me. If they seem inclined to be kinder, a word, or look, or action of mine will recall this shadow, and they freeze back again, and I feel once more that I am put aside out of their hearts like a criminal, or an alien."

"My dear child!" cried the young man, startled and perplexed, for there was a sound as of tears in her voice, "you are surely too sensitive; your guardians can't mean to be unkind. Perhaps you fancy——"

"Fancy," she interposed with sudden passion. "Oh no, it is no fancy, it is a feeling that has grown up with me from my childhood; it has been in my heart always—always. And now Lisschen says they wish me to enter a convent. The priests counsel it, and there seems nothing else to do with my life.

Well, I am not wanted by anybody; perhaps God will let me do something for Him."

She spoke so simply, with such childlike frankness, that the young man's heart was deeply touched. For a moment he was silent. His right hand was nervously fidgeting with the bandage that covered his eyes; curiosity was getting the better of prudence. He felt as if he must gain one look at the face belonging to that lovely, sad young voice.

She had forgotten his presence for a time; she was so used to being alone, and to speaking out her thoughts. When with a faint sigh she turned her head at last and looked, she was bewildered at finding two sunny blue eyes intently observing her. There was certainly no trace of blindness or weakness about them.

"You—you can see!" she cried impulsively.

"Yes; Heaven be thanked!" said the young Englishman energetically. "I was told I might only remove the bandage in a dark room; but for the first time I have disobeyed orders. I am amply rewarded," he added calmly, as he once more replaced the handkerchief. "Forgive me, but may I ask your name?"

"My name?" she said, and looked down at the daisies in her lap which her restless fingers were weaving into a garland. "They call me—Gretchen."

"Gretchen," he said. "It is a pretty name."

He was thinking of the picture he had seen, which he thought he should never forget—the picture of a slender girlish figure in a simple gray linen dress, with a face as fresh and innocent and fair as the spring itself, with a wealth of gold-brown hair that fell in one long heavy plait to her waist, and two lovely dark-lashed eyes of deepest violet that for a moment had flashed their startled wonder on his own.

Gretchen! an ill-omened name. He thought of it, and grew silent. Lonely—unloved—and with such a face! Amidst all the beauty of earth and sky—that delicious, dreamful enjoyment which had made the repose and shadow of the wood so pleasant, a feeling of vague dissatisfaction crept. He was almost sorry he had seen her.

Meanwhile she rose from her seat and addressed him in somewhat dignified accents. "I—I think you should not have told me you were blind, if you are not," she said gently. "I felt so sorry for you, and I came to talk to you, and all the time you can see as well as I can."

"Indeed," he cried eagerly, "I told you the truth, and I removed the bandage at a great risk. I could not resist the temptation. I so wished to see to whom I owed this pleasant half-hour."

The girl stood there silent. The colour came and went in her face. She was embarrassed, and yet pleased. There was no awkwardness or constraint about her—only a certain little pathetic air of wounded pride and perplexity that made her infinitely charming.

"Are you going?" he asked quickly, as she made a movement. "Don't; it would be a pity to wake Lisschen. Tell me some more about yourself. Do you—do you really *like* the idea of going into a convent?"

"I have always been brought up to look on it as the best and highest life," she said slowly. "It would be wrong to rebel."

"That," he said, "is begging the question. You don't like it. Who can wonder? I suppose," he added irrelevantly, after a short pause, "you can't speak anything but German?"

"No," she said. "I wanted much to learn English, but Tante was quite angry when I said so."

"And I," he said, "speak German so badly. I want to express myself quite differently to what I do."

"Oh," she said composedly, "you express yourself very well. I have understood all you said."

"And can you tell me," he asked, "why your amiable relatives dislike my language?"

"It is not," she answered, "the language only, but your nation—your people altogether—grandfather hates the very name—English."

"But why?" he asked again.

"That I cannot tell—I only know they would not

speak to an Englishman, or Englishwoman, if they could help it. No doubt they will be very angry when I tell them I have been speaking to you for so long."

"But why need you tell them?" he asked.

It was the first intrusion of the serpent into the innocence of Eden; the first shadow of doubt thrown across a mind that held still the crystal clearness of childhood.

"Why?" she echoed, and looked at him and then away to the sleeping form of Lisschen. "I never asked myself the reason, but I always tell them everything. They bade me do so."

The very simplicity of the answer rebuked him, and for a moment he was silent; a curious feeling came over him; it was as if a sudden light had flashed full and clear upon his eyes, awaking his sight to some sense of transparence, and beauty, and colour, to which he had hitherto been blind.

So might a child's question or answer lift the heart of some wise philosopher to a height far above human reason, by the very simplicity of its beautiful faith.

"And so you will tell them of this—meeting—and they will be angry—and perhaps I may never see you again," he said regretfully. "Doesn't that seem a little hard?"

Her bright face grew grave.

"Do you think it is possible that I—might—see you again?" she asked hesitatingly.

He thought to himself how strangely innocence resembled coquetry, but he only said:

"Very possible—if it depends on me."

"And do you think," she went on anxiously, "that it would be very wrong if I did—not—tell them—I mean if they do not ask?"

"Certainly not wrong, from my point of view," he said energetically. "But of course I do not wish to influence your conscience. As yet, child, you know nothing of a divided duty."

"No," she said simply, "duty always looks plain enough. I could not say what was not true."

"Let us hope they will not ask," he said gently. "For, indeed, if they are so unreasonable, it seems to me that they don't deserve such a sacrifice of self as your whole life seems. Why, the very birds, and flowers, and insects, have their summer-time of freedom and enjoyment. It seems hard that you should be denied it."

"I should like to be free—quite free!" she said, drawing a deep breath, as she threw back her head and looked upwards through the swaying leaves. "But I suppose one never is that."

"Never," said her companion bitterly. "Sometimes our fetters are silver, or iron, or silk, but all the same they are there—and we can't break them if we would. You may be thankful if yours are never heavier than the duty you at present owe. Now I am going to ask a favour of you. Will you," hesitatingly—and looking up with his concealed eyes to where he knew the little girlish figure was standing, "will you shake hands with me before you go? I hear my man coming in the distance, and so we must part."

For a moment she hesitated—then something in the appealing gesture, the helplessness of the strong young form, and of the very hand that was stretched towards her seeking hers, swept doubts and prudery away. She went a few steps nearer. Her little bare hand fluttered like a bird in his strong and eager clasp.

"I am glad to have seen you," she said simply. "And I hope your eyes will soon be quite well. I think," she added, dimpling with sudden laughter at memory of the stolen look, "there is not much doubt about—that."

"If I wished to recover sight before, I wish it a thousandfold more now," he answered with so deep an earnestness that it hushed her laughter into sudden gravity. "And now—no, I won't say good-bye, only, *auf wiedersehen.*"

## CHAPTER II.

### 'BUT I WOULD—LIVE!"

LISSCHEN woke with a start, and sat bolt upright, and looked round with the defiant, terribly wide-awake stare of a person who would say: "Tell me I have been napping, if you dare!"

Her charge was sitting at a little distance off—her slender fingers busy weaving a garland of daisies and wild grasses—the sunbeams playing at hide-and-seek over her golden hair, and the pretty curves and lines of her girlish figure.

Lisschen's sharp eyes saw nothing amiss. She rose to her feet and looked at the slanting sun-rays.

"We must be getting home. child," she said in her gruff voice. "It grows late."

"I am ready," said Gretchen, rising, and slinging her pretty garland on her arm.

The old woman looked sharply at her. There was so glad a ring in her voice, so bright a light in her face—a change, faint and indescribable, but yet a change. It was not possible that she could know that the wheel of Life's fate had been set in motion during her own brief period of slumber; and yet a suspicion leapt into life, and fastened itself upon her heart with something near akin to fear.

"You have had a long sleep, Lisschen," went on the girl merrily. "No doubt you were tired, and the afternoon was hot. Even the birds were quiet."

"I have not slept," cried the old woman sharply. "I did but close my eyes from the sun, while you were gathering your flowers." Then those same eyes turned again to the radiant young face. "Why do you smile so?" she asked suspiciously. "What have you seen or done that pleases you so?"

"Nay, Lisschen," said the girl, dimpling with happy laughter. "If you have been awake this hour past, you know all I have seen and done."

The woman gave a short grunt, and twisted her neglected knitting into a hard ball.

"Come," she said, "we waste time talking, and the *gnädige Frau* will be home from Vienna if we hurry not."

She trotted off without ceremony, her sharp eyes glancing from side to side as if in search of some suspicious object. The girl walked beside her in a vain endeavour to curb the exuberance of her spirits. Her feet seemed to dance along the path; her lips were perpetually breaking into smiles; snatches of joyous little songs left her ever and anon. Even cross old Lisschen could scarce resist the fascination of her blithe and jocund mood.

"I don't know what pleases you," she said at last. "One would think the Wald-Fee had been with you."

"Perhaps she has," laughed the girl merrily. "I was speaking to her when you had your eyes closed, Lisschen. I marvel you did not hear us talk."

"There was—some one, then," said the old woman sharply; "who was it?"

"Don't look so cross, and I will tell you," said Gretchen coaxingly, slipping her arm into that of the grim old servitor. "Ah, Lisschen, you were a young girl once, and pretty, I am sure; and doubtless Fritz thought so, before he went to that cruel war and was killed. Now, leave off frowning, and listen. I must tell some one, and I would rather tell you, even if you're cross."

"Well, well," said the old woman more amiably, "have thy way. Thou art a tiresome child, but I will listen; only do not fancy I was asleep in the woods. I knew thou wert speaking to some one."

"Indeed, you were asleep, sound asleep, good Lisschen. But no matter. I did but speak to a poor blind gentleman, whose servant had left him. And I suppose you heard all we said, did you not, Lisschen?"

"A blind man?" muttered the old woman; "no great harm there."

Indeed, she was rather uneasy at her own negligence of her charge, having always had strict injunc-

tions never to allow Gretchen to exchange words with any stranger, whether man or woman.

"Harm? Of course there was no harm!" cried the girl indignantly. "I wonder when I am to be treated like other people, or allowed to exchange words with a human creature outside the house. Oh, Lisschen, why is it that no one loves me there?—and yet they won't give me the chance of loving any one else."

"Hush!" cried the old woman, alarmed at the passionate outburst; "talk not so foolishly, child. You—what do you want with love? You are not for the world—you know that—nor for the company of friend and folk outside your own; you have heard that often enough. Take it to heart, then, and try to be content."

"But I can't be content," said the girl rebelliously. "I am young, and life looks so beautiful, and I want to enjoy it. Why should I not?"

"Because," said the old woman, her voice strangely troubled, "there are sins that fall on innocent heads, and wrongs that Heaven visits on other lives beside those to whom reparation belongs. Nay, ask no more. Thy life is a life born under black shadows—a shame and a sorrow to those with whom thy lot is cast. To offer it to Heaven is the best use to which it may be put. Think not of friends, or pleasure, or love; such things can only be a curse to thee—nothing more."

She had spoken so fiercely, with such suppressed passion, and yet such an unwilling sorrow for the sorrow her words wrought, that Gretchen looked at her in momentary wonder, seeming to trace some hidden vein of tenderness or emotion beneath this usually frozen surface.

Tears rose slowly to her eyes. Could any fate more cruel, any life more repugnant, be offered to one in whom the very light, and joy, and beauty of spring itself, seemed centred?

"It is very cruel," she said at last, the tears banished by a sudden flame of anger. "I, surely, might have some voice in the matter. Oh!" she added, her whole soul shaken with passionate

yearning, "if my mother had but lived she would not have treated me so unjustly; she would not at least have denied me such rights as belong to the commonest creatures on earth—air, freedom, sunshine, love. I had better have died when she did, than have lived for such a fate."

"To live as you wish might be a harder fate," said Lisschen; "there is always sorrow in the world—and the love of which you talk is only a pitfall and a snare."

"No matter!" said the girl defiantly, throwing back her bright head and looking up with glowing eyes to where the sunlight touched the heights. "No matter! I would risk them—dare them—defy them—but I would—live!"

The old woman looked at her in amazement. She had never heard such words from the childish lips, or seen such defiance in the childish face. It thrilled her with pity; for none knew better than herself that the feminine creature does not exist who can dare or defy the ills of such fate as comes to one who is beautiful, and nameless, and unloved.

They had left the wood now, and stood on a little hill from which could be seen the village of Neu-Waldegg, with its white houses and winding road, and the afternoon sunlight resting warm and bright on many a quaint old gabled roof. The call of a cuckoo sounded from a neighbouring bough, as it stood swaying among the budding blooms. Everywhere beauty and brilliance glowed warm and bright; and the girl who stood there with her wistful face turned homewards, might have well impersonated the very Goddess of Spring itself.

The woman looked at her with the softness of a sudden regret in her dim eyes, then hurried on, leaving the girl to follow as she would.

At the little restaurant below, a group of people were seated at the tables, some drinking milk, others smoking, and chattering, and laughing under the shady trees. A flock of pigeons, white and coloured, fluttered about the ground, or picked up the crumbs of black bread tossed to them by the women.

Seated at one of the tables, Lisschen noticed a

young man. He had a fair skin, and bright, soft hair; he held a rough stick in his hand; round the upper part of his face, and concealing his eyes, was bound a black silk handkerchief; a soft felt hat shaded his features.

For a moment the woman paused and looked at him. A man with a dark, olive-skinned face and deferential bearing, advanced from the trees bearing a glass of milk on a small tray, which he placed beside the young fellow.

Lisschen saw the quick turn of the head, and heard the lazy, musical voice murmur some words. She stood quite still as if turned to stone.

When the sound of light footsteps made her turn, she seized the arm of her young charge, while one brown, shaking hand pointed at the figures under the trees.

"Is that—the blind man?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yes," said Gretchen, colouring with sudden, shy delight.

"And he is an Englishman, and young. What a misfortune!" ejaculated Lisschen in horror. "Child," and she grasped the girl's slender arm so fiercely that it hurt her, "as you value the little liberty you have, speak not of this at home. Ah, surely the Evil One himself must have put it into my head to sleep this afternoon, of all others."

And before the astonished girl could speak a word, Lisschen hurried her past the little tables and the scattered groups, nor ever slackened speed till they reached the steep, roughly-paved street, which runs from Neu-Waldegg to Dornbach.

"Why do you all hate the English so?" asked Gretchen, panting and breathless, as the old woman at last moderated her pace.

"No matter," said Lisschen, "you will know some day."

"Some day," echoed the girl restlessly, "what use is that? I want to know now."

For to the young "some day" is as though one said "never." But Lisschen did not remember that, so long it was since Youth had been with her.

## CHAPTER III.

### PYRAMUS AND THISBE.

THE houses in Dornbach are wonderfully alike. One long, winding road—rough, and stony, and ill-paved—runs through the village, and straight on to the tramway lines that connect the little suburb with the bright, beautiful Austrian capital beyond. The houses on the right of the Hauptstrasse stand under the shelter of sloping hills, thickly wooded and very beautiful. In one of these houses lived the Herr von Waldstein and his unmarried daughter, sister to the unfortunate mother of Gretchen.

They were stern, proud, exclusive people. They mixed with no society; entertained no visitors; and went nowhere, except to the church, or occasionally to Vienna.

The every-day life of a German household is, at best, a dreary affair; but, situated as Gretchen was, her existence was doubly melancholy. It would have been unendurable but for the girl's brightness of disposition and sweet content—traits which might have won love from any hearts; but which, strange to say, only served to put her further and further away from the affections of her natural protectors.

Her education had been at the Convent; her only companions the grim and austere sisterhood. The severest creeds, the sternest self-discipline, the most bigoted faith, had alone been set before her. And yet, with all this, so intense was that exuberance of joyous youth, so rich was that mine of imagination, poetry, and feeling within her fresh young soul, that again and again she escaped from the hard tenets and unlovely teaching of her captors, and soared free and joyous above the level of their tyranny.

It was the morning after her meeting with the Englishman in the woods of Neu-Waldegg. The sun was flooding her little bare room with its warm,

abundant rays; outside in the garden the birds were all awake, and chattering and gossiping in free and friendly fashion.

The girl sprang up; her eyes bright as stars, her long hair flooding the pillow with its billows of gold. She was wide awake, and took a brief survey of the light and radiance which was tempting her from sleep.

"I will go and do some gardening," she thought, and forthwith sprang from the bed, and with rapid fingers made her morning toilet.

Certainly the girl had little or no vanity. Had it been otherwise, she might well have been pardoned for dwelling with delight on the picture she made.

Her cheeks glowed like rose petals; her lips were dimpled round with smiles at some thought that pleased her; her lovely hair curled and rippled from her brow, and fell in thick masses nearly to her feet. The curves of her slight young form would have enchanted a painter, as would the soft white throat, and rounded arms, and little lovely hands. But, enchanting as was the picture she made, Gretchen certainly gave it scant attention. The heavy hair was brushed rapidly, and with rather an impatience of its enviable length and thickness, tucked back behind the shell-like ears, and plaited into its usual tail; a few rebellious rings and curls were smoothed rigorously away from the white temple, only to struggle back again and soften the outlines of the sweet young face. Her gray linen dress was thrown on and buttoned with hasty fingers; then she snatched up a little white handkerchief and tied it over her head, knelt for a few moments before the tiny bracket that held an image of the Virgin and a wooden cross, and then went with swift, light steps down the polished stairs, and let herself out by a back door into the garden.

The garden was a large one; it ran far back from the house, and almost to the base of the wooded hills that surround Dornbach. She ran down the gravel path and past the blossoming fruit-trees, and on to the very end of the precincts, where she had her own

particular plot of ground, cultivated with that ardour that was characteristic of herself and everything she undertook.

Hoeing, and weeding, and digging, and raking; peering now and then into some green calyx; watching the industrious course of some noisily buzzing bee; listening to the glad song of some bird high up among the lofty boughs; so she loved to spend the bright morning hours, so she proposed to spend them now

Unconsciously to herself her own voice broke into song when her feathered favourite ceased. A sweet, gay little snatch of melody, expressive enough of light heart and joyous spirits.

It was a surprise to her when, at the end of that little outburst, a voice near at hand, and yet proceeding from no visible source, said softly: "Fräulein Gretchen!"

In vain the girl's startled eyes searched above and around; no one was visible. Again, however, the same voice breathed the same words.

"Who is it?" demanded the girl sharply, standing quite motionless now with the rake in her hand, and her eyes eager and questioning.

"Don't be frightened. Have you forgotten yesterday? You see my memory is better. I knew your voice at once."

"The Herr Engländer!" fell breathlessly from the girl's lips. "But where are you, then?"

"In the next garden. I find I am living next door to you. I told you my man had taken rooms for me in Dornbach. There is a gate here; it leads into the woods. Have you one also?"

"Yes; but it is locked."

"Confound it!" muttered the young man in English. "If you could get out we might go into the woods and have a talk," he added in her own language. "But, tell me first, were they angry with you for speaking to me yesterday?"

"They do not know," said the girl, her colour coming and going swiftly with the excitement of this unexpected meeting. "I told Lisschen, and she bade me keep it to myself."

"Wise Lisschen! And you will?

"I told you before, they hate your nation—it would only anger them."

"It is very foolish of them," said the young Englishman. "Why should they hate us?"

"I cannot tell."

"I hope," he said, "you won't follow their bad example. I should be sorry."

"I do not hate—anybody," she auswered, lifting up so radiant a face that it was a pity he could not see it.

"That is right—but I wish you would come into the woods and talk to me. It is rather tiresome to have to converse in this Pyramus and Thisbe fashion. Do not you think so?"

"Who were they?" asked the girl, evading a direct answer.

"Do you mean to say you never heard of Pyramus and Thisbe? Let me come to you and I will tell you the story."

"I love stories!" cried the girl eagerly. "But—I can't come into the woods to hear it—indeed I can't!"

"Then may I come to your gate and talk to you?"

For a moment Gretchen hesitated; some sense of that unwritten law which breathes its wisdom into even the most perfect innocence, bade her be cautious now.

"How is it you can tell the way?" she asked evasively.

"I can just remove my bandage for a moment; my sight is getting better every day. May I come?"

"I have no right to prevent your using the wood," she said, colouring shyly. "But I think it is not quite—right—is it? They would be angry if they knew I spoke to you—or, indeed, to any stranger."

"Then they are very unjust and uncharitable," said the young mau impetuously. "And I am—coming, Fräulein Gretchen!"

He suited the action to the word, unlatched the gate, crossed the iutervening space, and was at her own gate in a moment.

The girl threw down her rake, and went to meet him. They were completely shut out from sight of the house, even had those watchful and jealous guardians of the girl been stirring. But it was far too early for that, being indeed scarcely five o'clock. He put out his hand, and Gretchen gave him hers. There was no disfiguring bandage about his eyes; they looked at her as never eyes had looked before.

He was thinking how far lovelier she was than even he had thought her the previous day, thinking, too, that never again would he see a spring morning, or feel the rich sweet scents of fresh-turned earth and dewy flowers, without seeing, too, this one face, with its beautiful youth and gravely innocent eyes, look back at him from the picture.

For a moment only had the girl let her hand rest in his. She was quite silent; her eyes studying his face with the intent and serious gaze of a child who sees something new and strange.

It was a very handsome face, if somewhat effeminate by reason of that fair skin and soft bright hair, and a certain weakness or shortness of vision that gave the eyelids a tendency to droop.

"Well?" he said at last, and smiled.

She started and drew her hand away. "Was I rude?—forgive me, please. I was thinking how glad—oh, how very, very glad you must be to see all—this—again!"

Her hand gave a little comprehensive gesture which he followed.

"Glad! ah, that I am!" he said, "after all that long darkness to look up at sky, and trees, and sunshine. It is like life—health—freedom, when all seemed about to be lost. Glad! well—it is a poor word to express what I felt and feel. Every voice is like a friend's, and every face is beautiful."

Those eyes rested on her as he spoke with an eloquence that seemed to flash light and warmth into her soul, and fill it with new and varied feelings.

But the glance was not for long. He drew from his pocket a pair of glasses and put them on.

"The light is too brilliant as yet," he said. "You must forgive my looking hideous, mein Fräulein; my new possession is too precious to be risked for even such an excuse as your face."

The language of compliment was new to her. She did not even heed his words.

"The glasses make you look very funny," she said, "but you are right to be careful. Shall you have to wear them always?"

"Oh no, only for a short time! But come, don't trouble about me any longer. Do you still wish to hear your story?"

"Ah, yes!" she said eagerly. "Please begin, I have heard so few—except about the saints—and I am not allowed to read any books, except history, and philosophy, and religious treatises."

She stood resting her arms on the gate, the swaying boughs above throwing a thousand lights and shadows on her bright face and cool gray dress.

"Well," said the young man gently, "Pyramus and Thisbe were two unfortunate lovers, separated by cruel destiny. Do you know what lovers are, mein Fräulein?"

"No," she said seriously, "unless you mean what Fritz was to Lisschen—some one she was fond of and going to marry."

He laughed.

"I didn't give Lisschen credit for so near an approach to anything feminine as the weakness of contemplating marriage," he said. "But you are not far wrong; only these lovers could not contemplate matrimony, except through the crannies of a thick wall that separated them from each other. A hard fate ruled their destinies. They used to come one on one side of the wall and one on the other, and hold serious converse through a chink. Love, you know, has laughed at barriers ever since Eros first fluttered his silver wings on the heights of Olympus. But then, I suppose, your priests don't allow you any knowledge of the heathen deities."

"No," she said simply. "Were they very wicked?"

"Some of them were most decidedly wicked," he answered with becoming gravity. "It was on these Olympian heights, you know, that Cupid had his birth, and he is certainly the most mischievous and dangerous of any of the gods. There are a thousand pretty legends and stories of them; I could lend you any amount, but I suppose you wouldn't be allowed to read them."

He went on with the story, glancing ever and anon at the girl's absorbed face, with a sense of wonder that what was so old and stale to him could so enthral and entertain another.

Then at her request for more stories, he told her of Hercules and Omphale; of Apollo and Daphne; of Persephone, and Psyche, and Ariadne; and the girl listened with beating heart and scarlet cheeks, and all her soul seemed to catch the fire of this strange enchantment that alike had come to god and mortal, bringing sorrow and suffering in its train, yet with one hour of its immortal glory repaying the purchase-right of the hearts it cursed.

It was dangerous teaching for one ardent, imaginative, enthusiastic as herself. Far more dangerous than her teacher knew, as her innocent, eager questioning led him on and on, over what was a very old and beaten track to him. It certainly was to his credit that he clothed the stories he related in the most delicate language and the most fanciful imagery, so that the girl's pure mind caught no shadow of another meaning than her own pure and lofty fancies bestowed.

A full hour passed, and both were engrossed still in their occupation; indeed, there is no knowing how much longer it might have lasted, but for the click of the neighbouring gate and the sound of approaching footsteps. Gretchen started like one in a dream. Her companion turned his head impatiently.

"Is it you, Bari?" he said.

"Yes, monsieur," the man answered respectfully, and touching his hat as his dark eyes rested curiously

on the beautiful girl to whom his master had been speaking.

"I fear I must bid you farewell for the present," said the young Englishman reluctantly, as his eyes turned to the girl's eager face. In a lower voice he whispered hurriedly: "Be here to-morrow at the same time, I implore you."

Then he placed his hand in the man's arm, and went back into the shade of the woods.

"Bari," he said, as soon as they were out of earshot, "you have done a good many things for me since you have been in my service, and I don't think you have found me ungenerous. Now listen. I want you to find out everything you can about these neighbours of ours. Do you hear? It ought not to be difficult—for you."

"Yes, monsieur," the man answered calmly. "I will do my best."

"There is some mystery about—about that young lady," continued his master restlessly. "I am interested in her, you understand?"

A faint smile quivered over the closed, thin lips.

"I understand, monsieur, perfectly. It is a—private—matter, I suppose? I mean your uncle——"

"Good Heavens! Not a word to my uncle!" cried the young fellow energetically. "There is no need for him to know."

"No, monsieur, of course not."

Again that strange smile flickered over the thin lips, and lighted the somewhat sinister eyes. Perhaps it was a pity that Neale Kenyon's own eyes were less observant of this face than of Gretchen's. Had they not been so, he would have considered twice before putting a trust into keeping so untrustworthy, or bestowing so dangerous a confidence in one of whom he knew so little as he knew of this man. Bari had been selected and engaged for him by his uncle. He was an intelligent man—made as good a courier as a valet, and was to all intents and purposes both honest and trustworthy. An Italian by birth, he professed himself a mere cosmopolitan; spoke many languages, and

all equally well; and had proved himself invaluable to Neale Kenyon during his terrible affliction.

It had not occurred to the young man that Bari might become obnoxious, or obtrusive; that, if he so chose, he could play the spy only too well, and make the uncle pay for information which the nephew had already bought as confidence.

Neale Kenyon was far too careless to allow of any foothold for suspicion. There was nothing heroic about him; nothing that in any way set him apart from, or above his fellow man. He had been always a spoilt child of Fortune, and his blindness had brought him even more than its share of compassion, help, and tenderness. He was generous, but then generosity cost him nothing. He had inherited a small fortune from his mother, and was heir to the baronetcy held now by his uncle, Sir Roy Kenyon. This uncle had been his sole guardian, and was devotedly fond of the lad, denying him nothing, and fostering the weak points of a somewhat weak character by a systematic indulgence.

Sir Roy and his daughter Alexis were Neale's nearest relatives, and their house had been his ever since his boyhood. They had spent the greater part of the winter with him in Vienna, but had returned to England when the operation had been pronounced successful, leaving Neale to travel where and how he pleased under the care of Léon Bari.

One caution alone had been administered to the Italian by the Baronet.

"If you see any signs of my nephew committing any follies in the shape of falling in love, at once communicate with me. A little casual flirtation is all very well, but the young gentleman is to marry his cousin. That fact must be kept before him. Remember, Bari, I trust you."

The wily Italian assured the Baronet of his ability to guard his young master's interests, and having received a handsome "tip" for the promise, resolved in his own mind that it depended on that master himself to keep any of his peccadilloes from the ears or knowledge of his guardian. It was satisfactory to

be able to draw a salary from both, besides affording an opportunity for the exercise of those diplomatic talents on which he prided himself.

As yet no such opportunity had offered itself. To-day, however, Bari saw the first opening on that road to fortune, which he had assured himself lay in the mastery of the weak and generous-minded youth whom in his heart he rather despised.

To-day he saw Neale Kenyon roused and interested in something beyond the immediate pale of his own interests. To-day he would brace his energies and set his wits to work. If Bari had a weak point, it was pride in his own intellect, in his quickness, penetration, and secrecy.

"I would have made a great *diplomat*," he would say to himself. "There is no saying what I might not rise to, even now, if only I had not learnt that, for me, obscurity is safety."

And with that caution his brow would cloud, and the pulse of an ominous fear beat in his breast.

Whatever he had to do with the secrets of others, Léon Bari could keep his own securely enough. And to this man Neale Kenyon had entrusted the discovery of that mystery respecting Gretchen von Waldstein!

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## CHAPTER IV.

### MISUNDERSTOOD.

GRETCHEN turned to her garden, and mechanically began to tie up the plants and rake the beds once more. But her mind was absorbed, and her heart was no longer in her work.

Those beautiful myths and stories haunted her, as a first fairy-tale haunts the memory of a child. She looked at the sweet, wet, sunlit blossoms with dreaming eyes, and the birds' songs sounded afar

off to her ears, wherein now rang the remembered melody of a voice, the first voice that had spoken gracious and kindly words to her for her own sake alone. "To-morrow," she thought gladly, "I shall see him again. How strange that he should live so near! and oh, how clever he is, and how kind! How much he knows! and yet he does not let me feel that he thinks me only an ignorant child. What beautiful histories those are! I wish I could read them for myself."

She let the rake fall, and clasped her hands, and stood looking up at the dewy leaves, where the singing birds were fluttering to and fro.

"How sad to be blind!" The restless thoughts ran on, and a great wave of pity swept over the innocent heart.

It was such a tender, young heart, this girl's —full of love and longing, and beautiful hopes and fair dreams; ready to throw out its delicate tendrils to any support that offered itself; brimful of exquisite possibilities, that only needed a careful hand to nurture into the greatness and nobility of a heroic and noble life. And, with such a heart and such a nature, there she stood in her young life's fair spring-time, unloved, undesired, and misunderstood.

A hard fate truly. And yet by her scarce comprehended, so easy is it to be happy when the heart is young, and the immediate hour is existence.

How long she stood there absorbed in reverie she scarcely knew; but Lisschen's voice, sounding harsh and shrill from the house door, recalled her at last from dreams, and reminded her that breakfast would be a not unacceptable benefit after two hours in the fresh morning air. So she placed her garden tools in the tool-house, ran lightly up the gravel path, and entered the little tiled kitchen, where her cup of coffee and roll stood awaiting her.

"Where is Tante?" she asked, as she nodded questioningly to Lisschen.

"She is ill again," grumbled the old woman, "and no wonder, walking all the way from Vienna

yesterday. To-day she cannot lift her head from the pillow. I have taken her her coffee, and you must not go near her or disturb her, so she bade me say The Sister Maria will come this morning for your lessons."

"Ugh!" pouted the girl. "She is so cross and so ugly. I wish she would not come. I like Sister Cäerlie so much better. Where is the grandfather?" she added.

"Shut up in his own room," snorted Lisschen. "Where else should he be? Now make haste. I have no time to waste over chatter."

She was whisking her short brown skirts to and fro, and clattering her pans and dishes, in a way that showed her desire to have her kitchen to herself with all possible speed.

Gretchen hastily swallowed her coffee, and taking the bread in her hand, went out to the doorway to throw a shower of crumbs to the birds. The usual dull routine of the day must be gone through—the dry books read, the stiff, coarse sheets and garments hemmed for the poor. Everything that was harsh and dreary and unlovely seemed to be thrust into her hours of occupation, the better to disenchant her with the world and its vanities. It was no wonder she sometimes rebelled.

By the time the birds had finished their meal, Lisschen called to her to dust the parlour, and with a sigh she turned from the lovely sunlight and fresh, cool air to the dark room where the family usually sat. The floor had no carpet, but was in such a high state of polish and slipperiness that it was quite a perilous enterprise to walk across it. The hard, stiff chairs were arranged in a grim row against the wall. There was nothing pretty or cheerful in the way of knick-knacks, or ornaments, or even flowers. Everything was sober of tint and useful of design, and uncomfortable and hideous as the generality of German furniture used to be, and, indeed, often is at the present time, despite the advance of æsthetic art.

Long use had habituated Gretchen's eyes to the grimness and soberness of her surroundings. But she

often longed for a touch of colour from flowers or plants to brighten the room or relieve the eye.

The suggestion of such a thing, however, was enough to bring down a storm of wrath from her grandfather, or a cold rebuke from the proud, handsome lips of her aunt, so the girl only sighed at their want of taste, and tried to shut her eyes to the darkness and grimness that seemed to them so admirable.

At nine, Sister Maria came, and the morning sped on, and the girl's patience and gentleness brought her through the hard tasks, and enabled her to bear the harsh sarcasms of her teacher.

At the end of the lessons, however, she summoned up courage to ask a question that had long been rankling in her mind.

"Sister Maria," she said gently, "can you tell me if it is really decided that I am to enter the Convent?"

"Of course it is," answered the Sister. "Thy grandfather has at last fixed the day—on thy seventeenth birthday thou wilt give thyself to the blessed life, and become a Sister of our holy Order."

"My seventeenth birthday!" echoed the girl. "Six months—only six months."

Then suddenly the tears rushed to her eyes, and her voice broke out into entreaty:

"Oh, Sister, tell me, please tell me, must I do this thing? You talk about a vocation, but I feel none of the blessed privilege of serving Christ as you do. Cannot I serve Him as I do now? Can I not love Him, and yet live in the world He has made so beautiful? I do not think I should be the less pitiful to His creatures or mindful of himself by just living on free and content as I am. I know no one here loves me, or wants me—that is my misfortune; but I would try so hard to be good and gentle, and of use; and then, perhaps, in time they might forget that I was once a sorrow to them, and so let me live here to tend them, and love them as the years go on."

Earnestness had banished her tears. The longings of her heart, that had at last broken the bonds

of an enforced silence, burst forth in natural appeal for love and freedom.

The panting, passionate words rang out as might a prisoner's cry for liberty. In the doorway beyond a figure stood and heard, as if turned to stone. One hand was pressed to her heart, as if in pain, and there was a look of agony in her eyes that not even years of self-mastery could banish.

"Hush!" cried the Sister, and raised a warning finger. The girl's eyes turned to the spot it indicated. Her colour faded; a strange, humbled look came into the lovely eyes. She moved forward and touched the listless hand with her warm young lips.

"Tante, have I disturbed you? I am sorry."

With a terrible effort the proud face regained its calm. The girl's hand was put aside, and the erect, graceful figure moved on to its accustomed place. Meekly the girl followed.

"Lisschen said that you were ill, that you could not leave your room," she said gently.

"I am better," was the cold response. "Are the lessons finished, Sister Maria? What was that eager discussion about?"

"The Fräulein Gretchen is somewhat excited this morning," was the reply. "It will be well for her to retire to her own room and read this homily on patience and resignation; and I should also recommend some mortification of the flesh in the way of fasting for to-day. She has displayed an evil and rebellious spirit."

The proud, cold woman raised her head and looked at the girl. Something of yearning, of pity checked, and repressed, and forced down into unnatural composure, spoke out in that rapid glance. Then her eyes fell.

"You hear, Gretchen," she said calmly.

The girl turned away; her lips quivered; the hot colour flushed to her very brow in a passionate tide. Without another word she took the proffered book from Sister Maria's hands and left the room. At the door she paused and looked back at the two figures—

rigid, watchful, self-controlled as she, in her passionate youth, could never hope to be.

"Oh, why do you misjudge me so?" she cried, with momentary entreaty. "Indeed, indeed I try to be good and do what you wish; but no one loves me; and no one cares!"

There was no response, only the grim face of Sister Maria turned to that quiet figure seated in the darkest corner of the dark and dreary room. It almost seemed as if she expected, and, in some eager and thirsty way, watched for a change in the calm face, a quiver of the marble lips; but there was none.

Immovable, expressionless, beautiful as a statue, but even as a statue without life, and without feeling, so did she look while the plaintive appeal of that sad young voice still filled the room with its echoes.

"I think," croaked the harsh tones of Sister Maria, "I think, Fräulein von Waldstein, that it would be well if your niece were allowed less liberty of speech and action for these next six months. She grows somewhat opinionated and restive. She has made no new friends, I suppose?"

"Friends!" echoed that strange, cheerless voice. "No. She speaks to no one. She never goes out save with Lisschen or myself."

"Still there is a change somewhere," said the Sister thoughtfully. "She is not so meek or so heedful of rebuke as she was."

"She is very young," said Anna von Waldstein, in the same dull, measured way. "It is hard for the young to be always gloomy and repressed."

Her thin, white fingers were busy with some work she had taken up. Her face looked like a marble mask.

"Still she must be taught her duty," pursued the Sister vindictively. "Others have had to learn the same task, to repress the same longings, to vanquish the same desires. Life has its measure of suffering for every heart; none is exempt."

"No," echoed the calm voice bitterly. "Only some have a larger measure than others crowded into their lives. You know that, Sister."

"Those who suffer for others suffer doubly, you would say. It is Heaven's will. We must not rebel. If Gretchen suffers for her mother's sin, she but expiates a universal law. The sins of the guilty fall on the innocent."

There was no response. The white fingers went on mechanically with their work. The face never lost its look of frozen calm. The Sister gathered up her books and glanced at the clock.

"My time is up," she said grimly. "Father Joseph bade me tell you that the child has not been to confession this week. Will you remind her?"

"I will bring her to-morrow—myself," was the answer.

"Then I will wish you good-morrow, Fräulein von Waldstein."

As the door closed, as the heavy tread ceased to echo in the little paved hall, there came a strange alteration over the quiet face of Anna von Waldstein. The work fell from her hands; the hands themselves were clasped and lifted upwards, as in a sudden agony of appeal to some unknown and merciless power, that held her in its thrall. Such agony, such suffering, such an imploring voiceless cry never surely rent the soul of martyr, or of sinner. The proud eyes—proud no longer in that moment's broken calm—gazed upwards as if seeking to pierce the very realms of Heaven itself. The clasped hands wrung themselves together, and were flung out as if in search of—what? Something lost, yet nigh? Another hand, whose touch might thrill them with remembered joy; another clasp to calm and soothe the trembling passion of their own? The kiss of silent lips; the curls of a young child's head; the magic something which might have changed life and set its frozen currents to the music of love and bliss?

Perhaps for some of these—perhaps all—perhaps none. Within her heart a cry sounded, taking vengeance for long years of repression, forcing its way upwards through the close-bound gates of secrecy and self-control.

"No one to love her." That was what the child said. "No one to love her! Oh, if I only dared—if I only, only dared!"

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## CHAPTER V.

### THE DAWN.

GRETCHEN sat alone in her little room. A fierce feeling of indignation throbbed in her heart, and fired her gentle nature into wrath.

"I can't bear it," she said. "Oh, I can't bear it! Life is surely not meant to be a prison—a penance—something from which all light and joy are shut out for ever! What have I done that I should be doomed to such a fate?"

She paced to and fro the bare floor of her chamber like some wild, caged creature in its first hours of rebellion. She had never in all her life before felt such an indignant hatred of the circumstances of that life. But then, never before had the cage door been opened, or such sweet, tantalising glimpses of freedom given. Life, with its storied elements of romance—love, passion, delight—had been as a veiled picture before her eyes; but now the veil had been lifted, a glimpse of a hidden paradise revealed, and the thought that a living grave was her fate, and all such joys forbidden, filled her with a horror that words could not frame, a passionate rebellion that almost terrified herself. She had thrown her book on the bed; she turned to her window, and looked out longingly at the bright sunshine.

Then her eyes strayed from that altitude of sky and hill to the nearer level of the garden. From thence again they wandered to that jealously shut out domain which was now invested with such special interest. The trees were high, and the drooping branches made a partial screen; but there was one little break among the boughs which permitted her to

see a smooth green lawn and a figure seated on a low lounging chair.

Her heart beat quicker. Here at least was an interest for her in her hours of imprisonment.

"If he could only see!" she thought regretfully, as her own eyes took in, with a strange familiar gladness, the grace and strength of the handsome figure.

But he had resumed the old disfiguring bandage, and was lying lazily back under the trees, smoking a cigarette. Still, the very fact of having some one to watch and speculate about, some new interest in her life's daily monotony, was pleasant to the girl; and she softly opened the little window, and knelt there, with eager gaze and quick fancies, and her sorrows half forgotten.

Time passed on. The young Englishman had finished his cigarette, and was dozing in his chair. Still the girl knelt there by the open window and watched, and a thousand sweet fancies drifted through her mind, and wove themselves into a romance more fit for fairyland than for reality.

She seemed quite forgotten. No one came near her. She had had no food since breakfast, and began to feel quite conscious of the fact.

Presently the Englishman's servant appeared on the scene, and led his master into the house. After that Gretchen felt her interest in the garden considerably lessened, and she rose from her position at the window, and took up the discarded book.

Just as she had begun the dry homily prescribed by Sister Maria, the door was abruptly opened, and Lisschen entered with a tray containing some soup and bread.

She put the tray down on the chair by the window, and then turned to the girl with a little less gruffness and harshness than usual.

"This is to be all your dinner," she said. "I call it a shame. Youth is for something better than starving and book-learning. So the Sister has had you punished again."

"Yes, Lisschen," answered the girl, flinging aside the book once more. "Oh, I am so hungry," she

added joyfully, "I thought you had forgotten all about my dinner."

"Sit down and eat," said Lisschen, drawing up a stool and seating herself on it. "I do not make two journeys when one will do."

The girl needed no second biddings. Had she been less keen of appetite she might have noticed the intent, yet covert scrutiny, of the old woman's eyes. It almost seemed as if some new light had dawned upon them—as if, in place of long familiarity, a startling and unexpected discovery had flashed.

"Gretchen," she said at last, "you have kept your own counsel about the English gentleman yesterday"

The girl looked hastily up, her face flushing like a rose. "But, yes," she said, "you told me to do so, Lisschen."

"True," nodded the old woman, and a faint smile curled the corners of her mouth. "And I tell you so still. There may be great good fortune in store for you, child. Mind, I say no more, only let those watch, who think they can see. Sister Maria, indeed!"

She tossed her head contemptuously.

Gretchen laid down her spoon and looked at her in astonishment.

"Good fortune for me! Oh, no, Lisschen. That is too much to expect. They told me to-day that everything is arranged. I am to enter the Convent on my seventeenth birthday. What can alter that?"

Again that odd smile quivered round the old woman's mouth.

"You have a fair face," she said. "Such faces do not lend themselves readily to a nun's hood, or a convent cell. Oh, do not open your eyes too wide. I know what I know. A rich and handsome husband would suit you better than a life of penance and piety. Well, I was young myself once, and well-favoured too, and I know what a lover's tongue promises."

Gretchen had risen to her feet now; her face was pale, her eyes wide and astonished. Lisschen—surly,

cross-grained old Lisschen to speak like this—what had chanced to her?

"What do you mean?" she asked breathlessly. "Has—has any one been speaking to you?"

The old woman lowered her voice and came nearer.

"I went down the Hauptstrasse this morning," she said cautiously. "I met some one who spoke to me of—you. Well, well, why should I not tell it? He is the servant of the Englishman. His master is rich and great, and he has fallen in love with you. Your fortune is made, Gretchen, and of a surety it will suit you better to be loved and wedded than to pass your life within convent walls. I said I would tell you, and I have done it. For the rest you must please yourself. You look surprised. I am only crabbed old Lisschen, who have had more cross words than kind for thee! So—but my heart felt for thee all the same, and I would help thee from thy cage if thou hast a mind to fly!"

But Gretchen only stood there silent for very amazement. The rich blood dyed her cheeks; her pulses beat wildly. She could scarcely credit all she heard. To leave this hard, cold, loveless life; to be rich, beloved, happy, free! It seemed to her as if she did but dream.

The transformation in Lisschen amazed her too. She could not believe that the grim old serving-woman could have softened towards her so suddenly. Unhappily for herself, she was too unsuspicious to fathom the real reason, or attribute sordid or interested motives. Léon Bari had played the part of Mephistopheles fairly well, and Lisschen had not been proof against a golden bribe. At first she was astounded at the bare idea of the child having made the conquest he hinted; but when its proof came home to her in substantial results for herself, she thought it would be no great sin to help the girl to fortune and happiness, and reward her own exertions by independence from that time.

"It seems like a fairy-tale," cried Gretchen at last. "I to be loved—married! Freed from this hateful

bondage! Oh, Lisschen, can it really, really be true?"

"It is quite true, child; but you must be careful, very careful. Sharp eyes are upon us, and to be discovered means ruin. You must learn your tasks and submit yourself as of old. But I will contrive that you shall have your lover. Do not fear for that."

"My—lover!"

The girl's face grew rosy red with shy and sudden shame. But that very morning she had asked what a lover was, and now to have one of her very own. It was incredible.

"He can't be—that, Lisschen," she faltered. "He scarcely knows me; he has only seen me twice."

"It does not need much seeing for love to come," answered the old woman. "Once will do it, for the matter of that! Now take this. 'Tis the key of the garden-gate leading into the woods. Be there to-morrow by five o'clock, as you were to-day. No one will miss the key. I have always had it. Only do not tarry too long, for thy grandfather may walk in the garden and miss thee. Now I must go, or they will wonder. You are to stay in your room all the rest of the day. But I have given thee something better to think of than Sister Maria's homilies, have I not?"

But the girl was too astounded and bewildered to speak. She only stood there with the sweet colour coming and going in her cheeks; stood there believing that she must surely dream—that soon, only too soon, she would waken to the old dreary, lonely life again.

When the door had closed on Lisschen, she threw herself on her bed and buried her face in her arms. Life—thought—feeling—the whole world was changed for her! The innocence and ignorance of childhood seemed to fall away, and before her lay a golden, dazzling region of possibilities hitherto undreamt of. She had been so drilled into thinking a religious life her whole future, that the first thrill of relief, the promise of freedom, the hint of unimagined joys lying beyond the golden gates of liberty almost terrified her with the gladness and wonder that they brought her heart.

The sunlight faded at last. The glow and fervour of day lost its meaning as the hours drifted by. She rose and looked around as one who wakes from a dream. "Am I really myself?" she asked, as she caught sight of her face in the little mirror, staring at its reflection as if it were something altogether unknown.

Then a smile broke over her lips.

"It will soon be to-morrow now," she thought. "I wonder what he will say to me!"

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## CHAPTER VI.

### WHAT HE SAID.

THROUGH her little square casement Gretchen could see the apple boughs swaying, and the broad sunshine streaming over dew-wet blossom and leaf.

She sprang up from sleep, and wondered vaguely why she was happy. Then memory came back in thronging thoughts that told of yesterday, and she hastened with glad young feet, that scarcely touched the ground, to that new world of love and light which lay beyond the long-closed garden gates. He was there—waiting.

Bari was in the background, but discreetly retired. His master could do without his aid, now.

Only when she stood face to face with the young man whom Lisschen had declared to be her lover, did Gretchen feel a little odd sense of shyness and surprise.

They shook hands, and the Englishman closed the gate, and drew her arm within his own, and led her into the heart of the woods in silence.

Indeed, he felt speech to be impossible; his heart was so full of tumult and uneasiness.

"What did you do with yourself all yesterday?" he asked, at last. "I went to the woods again, but I did not see you."

"I was in disgrace," she answered deprecatingly. "I spent the day in my own room."

"What a shame!" he cried in his indifferent German. "Your relations must be very tyrannical people."

He had heard about these same people. He had gained an insight into her life and its hidden mystery of reproach, since yesterday. His own quick fancy supplied the rest; but she herself was as unconscious of his knowledge, as of her own history.

"I told you what they were," she said with a sigh. "But I think Tante would not be so severe if it were not for Sister Maria."

"Let us sit down," he said abruptly; "I want to speak to you about your future."

She guided him to the fallen trunk of a long-felled tree—lichen-covered and moss-grown—and there they seated themselves. She drew her hand away from his arm, linked it in her other hand, and so, with head a little bent and the soft colour coming and going in her cheeks, sat listening.

"I have only seen you twice," he said earnestly. "But I can't bear to think of you so young and beautiful, and friendless, and condemned to such a cruel fate. Tell me, is there no one to whom you could appeal—no other relation or friend who would save you from this living grave?"

"No," she said simply. "I told you I had no one to care for me enough to give me a home. Tante says it is best for me to go into the Convent. I have always heard that, ever since I can remember."

"But you don't wish it?"

"Oh, no. No! No!" she cried passionately. "I cannot bear the thought! It was hateful before—but now——"

She stopped suddenly. Some instinct of maidenly shyness whispered to her heart a warning. Even to a—lover—it was not wise to speak too plainly.

But he did not want her to speak. He was not unversed in women's ways, and he knew well enough what lurked beneath that half-uttered avowal. A little thrill of triumph ran through his heart. He

took off the hateful glasses and bent eagerly forward, looking with longing eyes into the lovely girlish face.

"Now," he said eagerly, "you believe that there is something better in life than a gloomy faith, and a bigoted religion. Now you know that youth and beauty have been given to women for some other purpose than seclusion—immolation—self-sacrifice! Is it not so?"

"You have told me that," she answered gravely. "Perhaps I am wrong to listen to you. I am so ignorant. No one has ever spoken to me as you have done. Tell me, then, for what women live besides—besides religion?"

"For love," he said, low and passionately. "For men to worship and adore! To be wives, and mothers, and helpmates. To lift our gross natures into their own regions of purity and faith! To make the world a paradise. To give to us tired toilers a glimpse of the Heaven that lives in their own dreams. That is what God made them for—some of them—at least!"

His eyes met her own. They were soft, humid, abstracted—the eyes of a child in some sweet maze of doubt, and their innocent questioning smote him to the heart.

"Tell me, now," she said, half-timidly. "What is—Love?"

Such a question, from lips young and beautiful, and sacred yet from any lover's touch! Such a question from woman's heart to man's, while yet the blood of youth ran hot and swift through every vein, and beat in every pulse! The impulse of his heart was to take her in his arms and touch that sweet child-mouth with Love's first baptism—a kiss; but something in the innocent eyes kept back the impulse, and stayed the desecrating touch. He drew a sharp, short breath, and his eyes sought the ground instead of her own fair face.

"Love?—" he said. "It is not easy to describe. When it comes—we know. Before that—it is only to fancy an angel that brings perfect dreams, and wake to darkness."

"But the love you spoke of yesterday," she said, "that made the gods human, and humanity as gods. That must be beautiful. The world holds that, you said. I think I would choose such a world in preference now to what Sister Maria tells me of that other. I must be very wicked, but I never can fancy the joys or glories of which she speaks. I try so hard, but I cannot. Now, when you speak I seem to see all you say, and I—oh! I think it would make me far, far happier to be loved, than even to be as good and as pious as Sister Maria."

She spoke with the beautiful audacity of perfect fearlessness and perfect innocence. It never occurred to her—it could not—that her words held a perilous temptation for two lives—that their unguarded simplicity was as the foundation-stone of a fabric, unstable, beautiful as any dream, but, like a dream, unreal.

Again he looked at her, and the look thrilled her as never look or word had yet held power to do. Her face grew very white, her eyes filled. The sweet air and the noise of singing birds, the soft rustle of the wind above her head, seemed to reach her in some dizzy, far-off way.

He bent towards her, and took her hand in his:

"We will not talk of Sister Maria," he said, "only of ourselves."

The colour came back to her face. She let her hand lie passive in that close, warm clasp.

"Ah, yes!" she sighed. "Tell me about yourself, your home, your life in the world. Mine must seem so simple and stupid, I wonder you care to hear of it."

"I care to hear it because it is yours," he answered tenderly. "What affects you interests me."

"But why should it?"

He smiled, and once again he looked at her.

"I will tell you of myself—yes," he said softly; "but only of myself since I have known you. I do not think I feel much interest in what goes before."

So another charmed hour went on; and she listened as Juliet listened to her Romeo—as Marguérite to

Faust—as Héloise to Abelard—as from all time to all time women will listen to the magic of lovers' tales, and hang entranced on the music of lovers' tongues.

It was he who woke to caution and remembrance first, who suggested that time had not stayed for their foolish converse, and that prudence demanded her return.

She rose at once. Her eyes were dim and dilated, her senses were lulled into a very ecstacy of dreams—beautiful, absorbed, child-like, unreal dreams, that seemed to have changed the face of the whole world and her whole life.

In silence they walked to the gate. In silence he took her hand, and raised it to his lips.

"You will come again to-morrow?" he asked very softly.

That touch thrilled her as with some new, vague fear which, amidst all her new-found joy, spoke warningly.

"I do not know," she stammered, and looked down at the hand his lips had touched, in sweet and sudden shame. "Is it—right?"

"Right?" he echoed vaguely. "Why not right to-morrow as to-day?"

Still she hesitated; why, she could not tell. Her eyes looked at him, appealing for guidance, help, advice, but finding none. Nothing so calls forth the innate selfishness of a man's heart as the fear of losing the object of its newly-awakened interest.

"You must come," he said decidedly. "I have so many things to tell you. The time has been too short to say half. Promise you will come. Why should you be afraid?"

She lifted her bright head proudly. "I am not afraid. Why should I be?" she said with her natural fearlessness. "Only, when I have begun to be happy, it will be so much harder to turn away to gloom and sadness once again."

"And have you begun to be—happy?" he asked, flushing like a girl at the unconscious confession of his power. "Then you shall not go back to gloom and sadness if I can help it. And, if so little makes you

happy, a little more will make you happier. And I will teach you, Gretchen, what that 'little more' is. You will come to-morrow?"

"I—I cannot promise," she cried trembling, for the passion in his eyes and in his voice terrified her.

"Yes, you can, and you must. I shall wait here till you do. Say yes, child. You are not a coquette as yet, but you play with fire as if you were. Say yes."

Her head drooped. She grew very pale, then opened the gate suddenly, and passed in. Her hands trembled, her breath came short and uneven through her parted lips.

"You would not ask me if it were wrong?" she murmured appealingly from her vantage ground. "You know so much better than I do."

"Trust me, child—it is not wrong," he said earnestly. "I could not harm you for all the world."

"I do trust you," she said simply; "and I will come to-morrow."

She moved away, less buoyant of step than she had been yesterday—less jubilant of heart, too; for all that she knew she was happy, oh, so happy! Hitherto her heart had been like a placid stream, clear, smooth, untroubled. But to such a stream the first breath of passion is as a disturbing blast that ruffles the still calm surface, and sets in swifter motion all its hidden currents.

Then Gretchen, moving up the garden walks, with head downbent and eyes full of tender dreams, would never again ask, "What is Love?" for to her Love had come this fair spring day; come in unseen, subtle disguise, to be the master of her fate—to mould or mar her life!

## CHAPTER VII.

### DISCOVERED.

"WELL," said Lisschen sharply, looking at Gretchen's absorbed face, "has he asked thee in marriage? Is it settled?"

The girl started.

"I do not know," she said shyly. "Marriage? No, he did not speak of marriage. What haste you are in, Lisschen!"

The old woman was bustling about the kitchen preparing coffee. She gave a short grunt.

"Haste! Well, there is need of haste; though, indeed, how you are to wed any one, guarded and spied upon as you are, I cannot tell. Still, I said I would help; and so I will. Listen, child," and she dropped her voice and came nearer. "Do you know you have to go to confession to-day?"

Gretchen started and turned pale.

"Oh, Lisschen!" she cried beseechingly, "and must I tell about the Englishman?"

"Not unless you are a fool," answered the old woman. "Keep it back for a time, and then confess if you feel it will make your soul easier. Did you whisper of love or lovers, you would be clapped into your Convent at once, with never a question of will or wish about it. When you are married, you can confess what you please."

"It must be very strange to be—married," said the girl, seating herself on the wooden bench. "Do people who love always get married, Lisschen?"

A grim smile curled the thin lips of the old woman.

"Mostly they do," she said. "They say 'tis Heaven's law. I always thought it a question of *dot* myself."

"I cannot fancy myself married," the girl went on dreamily; "and are husbands better than lovers, do you fancy?"

"Of course!" grumbled the old woman. "They provide for you and work for you, instead of making silly speeches; but women—mostly young ones—prefer the lovers. And that reminds me," she added, "you must get your lover to take you to England to be married. Here he cannot satisfy the laws. It is different in his own country. A man can marry whom he pleases without asking leave of any one."

"Laws!" murmured the girl, vaguely. "What have laws to do with it, Lisschen?"

"Oh, that is not for me to say," answered Lisschen, shortly. "There are laws for everything here; 'tis to make life harder, I fancy. I never could get the wrongs or the rights of them myself; but then I'm simple and ignorant, and the priests tell one what to do when one is in difficulty."

"But the priests would not counsel me to marry an Englishman," said Gretchen thoughtfully.

"No, that would they not. Therefore, I say, keep your own counsel for a time, and put a good face on matters, and learn your tasks as they tell you. It will not be for very long."

"Oh, Lisschen," cried the girl suddenly, as she looked up at the old, wrinkled, crabbed face, "do you know that if—now—I had to give up this hope—if I never saw him again—if I had to enter the Convent, it would kill me. I could not bear it. I should pray to Heaven to let me die!"

"Hush!" cried the old woman warningly. "Somebody is coming. Begone into the parlour. It is not well that you should be seen here."

Thicker and thicker the tangled webs of deceit were weaving themselves about the girl's life. From one trivial concealment how much had spruug! how much had yet to spring!

The day passed on in its usual dreary routine. The dreaded hour of confession came and went. Thanks to Lisschen's advice and the priest's own knowledge of her secluded and rigorous life, she managed to escape question, or suspicion.

But she felt terribly guilty and unhappy all the

same, and even her new, sweet secret lost some of its charm.

That night she slept ill, and was restless and feverish; but, all the same, she was up and out as the clock struck five. No one was waiting at the gate as she let herself through, and a little thrill of fear ran through her heart, as she thought that something might have chanced to keep her lover from his appointment. She called him *that* in the most natural and innocent manner. Lisschen had said so, and it seemed but right and natural to continue the appellation.

Moment after moment passed. The sunlight fell through the leaves, the birds were singing loudly and gaily among the branches, but for once the sunlight and the song were dull and meaningless to her. She listened for a step on the grass, a voice in her ear, that should bring back the glory and the music once again.

At last the gate swung back. A voice called to her softly:

"You have been waiting? I am so sorry!"

He reached her side in a moment, and took her hand in greeting. "Can you forgive me? The truth is I overslept myself, and that tiresome man never called me."

"I am so glad you have come," she said frankly, "I feared you were ill."

"And you were sorry—you hoped I would be here?" he asked softly.

"Oh yes," she said gravely and seriously. "You see it is pleasant to have some one to talk to besides Lisschen; and I should miss you very much now—though, indeed, I don't know why I should, for I have only seen you three times in all."

"Yes," he said smiling. "But we know each other very well for all that, Gretchen, do we not? You see I call you Gretchen. And I want you to call me by my name. Will you?"

"What is it?" she asked.

"Neale—Neale Kenyon. Can you get your little foreign tongue round that, do you think? I should like to teach you English, child. Would you learn?"

"I would learn anything you taught me," said Gretchen simply. "And that is not a hard name to say —Neale—for I can pronounce it quite easily. Yes, I should like to learn English. You know my father was of your nation."

"Ah, true," he answered, and his brow clouded suddenly.

It occurred to him sharply, like a reproach, that he wished he had not seen this girl; or that, having seen her, it was possible to forget the childish, dimpled beauty of the young face, and the waking soul that looked out now from those lovely eyes. "Perhaps her mother's eyes were like them," he said to himself, and then he remembered Bari's story, and felt thankful that he at least was not a villain like that mother's betrayer.

"Come," he said at last, shaking off these gloomy thoughts with an effort, "let us sit down again; I want to talk to you. Tell me, have you thought of me at all since we parted yesterday?"

"But—yes," she said with all seriousness. "How could I help it? Do you know that for you I committed a great sin?"

"A sin—you?" he echoed incredulously. "I should like to hear it."

"I withheld a true confession from Father Joseph," she said slowly. "It is very wicked, but I dared not tell him of you, or I should never be allowed to see you again."

The young man's lips curled with faint contempt. He had nothing in common with priesthood and superstition.

"You were quite right," he said indignantly. "What business has one human being to arrogate to himself the right of knowing the secrets of another's heart, the feelings of another's soul? Do not say anything of me, Gretchen, to any one until I give you leave. Promise me that."

"I promise," she said readily. "Indeed I do not wish to speak of you to any one else. I like only to think of you to myself."

"You innocent child," he said tenderly. "I wonder

if you would care very much if you never saw me again? Tell me."

"Care," she echoed dreamily, "I cannot tell if I would 'care.' It would be a great chill blank, and the old life would close over me—and I—I should pray to Heaven to let me die. That is all."

"All!" he said, half glad, half shamed at the innocent confession, and yet proud of the love he had awakened for himself. "It is too much, child, far too much. And why should you care like that when you know me so little?"

She shook her head.

"I cannot tell. As you say it is strange, for I have seen you but three times, and I have known Lisschen, and Tante, and grandfather all my life, and yet——"

"And yet—would you leave them for me, did I ask it?" he said hurriedly.

"Leave them?" Her eyes grew troubled and fell beneath his own. "I do not know what you mean."

He drew her towards him as he might have drawn a child, and his lips lightly touched her hands.

"Look in my eyes, Gretchen," he whispered. "I think you do know what I mean."

She lifted the long lashes shyly, questioningly, and for a moment met that eager, burning gaze. Then the colour rushed in a glowing tide over cheek, and brow and throat. She had learned her lesson and he knew it.

"Ah, child," he murmured, and drew her closer yet to his beating heart. 'But yesterday you asked me what was love; to-day you can give me the answer for yourself. Or, stay, we do not need words, you and I. This—shall teach it you."

Softly his lips touched her own—the little flower-like velvet mouth that never yet had felt the touch of any lover's kiss.

In that moment something reverent, pitiful, chivalrous, stirred his heart, and purged away the dross of grosser passions. In that moment she was sacred to

him, and he would no more have whispered thought or word of harm to her, than have struck her with a blow.

As for her she leant there against his heart, rapt in a very ecstacy of wonder. A light came over her face, changing all its childish youth into glory — changing it as daybreak changes earth and sky. The colour that had flushed her cheeks crept upwards to the golden ripples of her hair, and she trembled like a leaf in his arms.

But she was not frightened or ashamed, only glad with a gladness that made her senses reel, and set the sunny leaves into mazy circles, and made the blue sky swim before her sight, and lifted her heart, her soul, her very being, on the strong, swift current of its unintelligible happiness to bear her—so it seemed—into the very courts of Paradise.

Moments passed, filled only by broken words. Great joy is never prolific of expression. Gretchen still nestled there as naturally as a child who has found a resting-place, and listened entranced to her lover's broken murmurs.

"I have so often heard of people falling in love at first sight. . . I can't say I ever believed in it. But my whole life has changed since the moment I lifted the bandage from my eyes and saw you sitting on that bank with the daisies in your lap. . Do you remember, dear? That look set the wheels of Fate moving rapidly enough. I think you have never been out of my thoughts a single moment since. And yet what a child you are, and how ignorant of your power! But you love me, Gretchen, and love will make a woman of you, as it did of your namesake with the daisies . is it not so?"

"Who was she?" asked Gretchen innocently. "And was she fond of daisies too?"

"Yes," he answered somewhat hurriedly, feeling no desire to repeat that ill-omened tale. "She was in love, and she asked the daisies if her lover was true?"

"The daisies could not know."

He smiled.

"Of course not, sweetheart. But she asked them all the same. Her heart gave the answer."

"And that was——"

"That he loved her passionately, wholly, entirely, as I love you, Gretchen."

"Ah," sighed the girl, raising her heavy lids, "how happy she must have been!"

"Not happier than you, or any one who loves, my child. It is an old story; but we each think it new when it comes to ourselves."

"It is very new to me," she said with a faint sigh, "for no one has ever loved me. I wonder why you do," she added, drawing a little away from his arms and looking up with soft and puzzled eyes to his face.

"I cannot tell you," he said tenderly. "Perhaps because you are so fair, and sweet, and look so true; perhaps because you love me; perhaps—and best reason of all—because I can't help myself. Don't puzzle your innocent heart for reasons, sweetheart; accept the fact."

She shook her head.

"I shall never think it anything but wonderful," she said seriously. "You, who are so clever, who know everything and have seen so much, to care for a little ignorant child! Perhaps," she added sorrowfully, "you will be sorry one day. There must be beautiful women in your world, and great and clever women too."

"So there are," he said smilingly. "But I know none with an innocent soul such as yours, Gretchen, and none with that look which lives in your eyes and springs from the purest of pure sources. And so I love you, dear, and that must content you; for no man could say more even were his heart fuller than my own."

"There is no need to say more," answered the girl, and raised her drooping face and looked at him with those deep, haunting eyes. "But I shall never cease to think how wonderful, and oh, how good it is of you to love me!"

A little sob broke the faltering words. Her full heart scarce could bear its new weight of joy. Then,

swift as thought, her face paled, she sprang to her feet with eyes dilated and full of a terrible fear. Her hands fell to her side.

"Look!" she cried in a strange, stifled voice. "It is—grandfather!"

Neale Kenyon rose also to his feet. Some few yards off a solitary figure stood, stern, fierce, wrathful of face—the figure of a man old in years and prejudices, and pitiless of heart and nature. One look told so much of his history to the young Englishman; one look, and then Gretchen was snatched from his side, and all the bitterest and most terrible invectives of the Teutonic tongue were hissing from those white and trembling lips.

Neale Kenyon could not stem the torrent, so he waited patiently until it should have exhausted itself. Then he spoke simply, coolly, to the point.

"Sir, I love your granddaughter. It is true that I am not as yet acquainted with yourself, but I should have called to lay my proposals before you in proper form. I am not sufficiently acquainted with German etiquette to know how or why I have erred in speaking to her. If you will permit me to call or explain——"

The torrent broke out again:

"Explain! Himmel! No puppy of an Englishman shall set foot in my house! Explain, what is there to explain? Nothing! The girl is not for any man's love. She is vowed to the Church, and to the Church she shall go. Explain! Could temerity and insolence go further? These dogs of Englishmen think they are to have things all their own way!" and so on, with shaking hands and furious tongue, and a whirlwind of passionate gestures that fairly stunned and bewildered Neale Kenyon.

It was in vain that he attempted to speak, in vain that he asked for a moment's patience. The old man waved him imperiously back, and seizing poor little sobbing, trembling Gretchen by the arm, dragged her away in a fury of wrath and indignation.

The young Englishman stood there almost stunned with the suddenness of these events:

"What am I to do?" he muttered, pacing to and fro the little glade where his love-story had been so ruthlessly interrupted. "Good Heavens, what a brute the man is! Poor child—poor little innocent! Will they force her into the Convent now, as revenge? What a dilemma! What on earth am I to do?"

"Monsieur is in trouble!" said the soft, silky voice of his attendant in his ear. "I saw the angry grandfather, and the young lady sobbing as if her heart would break. It is all then discovered."

"Oh, Bari," cried Neale Kenyon distractedly, "tell me, my good fellow, how one can pacify a German bear. That poor child, what will become of her?"

The Italian shrugged his shoulders.

"It is like the comedies they play—parted lovers, angry guardians, and so on. You must do also as the lover in the play—circumvent them, Monsieur."

"Yes, but how?" asked the young Englishman gloomily.

The Italian looked at him with something very like contempt.

"How? There is always a way when one loves. Time will show. And we have a friend in the citadel fortunately. The good and ugly Lisschen will inform us of what goes on; but Monsieur had better prepare for flight. The gentlemen of the black robe do not like wolves to meddle with their lambs, and it will have to end in robbing the sheep-fold, I fear."

The young man threw himself down on the fallen tree, and groaned aloud. "I wish I had never come here. I wish I had never seen her—no, I don't wish that. I can't give her up, Bari, that's impossible; and yet I don't see how I can marry her."

The Italian looked at him with his dark, keen eyes and smiled. "Monsieur wishes to marry the young lady? Monsieur is not aware of the many complicated rules and laws appertaining to civil contracts. Besides, there is the insurmountable barrier—difference of religion, and—what of the young English lady to whom Monsieur is engaged?"

"I am not engaged," was the fierce answer.

"Mind your own business, Bari. I am free to marry whom I choose, and I never cared for Miss Kenyon, and she knows it. But about this young lady—something must be done, and at once. Can you get speech of the old woman and hear what has happened? You say she took kindly to bribes: promise her anything—anything—a hundred pounds, if you like, if she will only help us. The child must not be left to the tender mercies of that crew. Do you hear, Bari?"

"I hear, Monsieur; I will do my best. If it is a question of German brains against my own, I do not fear the results. They are heavy, ponderous, speculative, but they know not—finesse!"

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### "IT IS TOO LATE!"

In the little parlour, in solemn conclave, sat Sister Maria, the old priest Father Joseph, and Gretchen's two relatives. Above, locked in her own little chamber, the girl lay white and stunned, and full of terrible dread.

Her thoughts could scarce keep pace with the rapid march of events, so much had happened since that morning, when her childish feet had hastened to meet her lover. So much—ah! indeed, so much. The whole current of her life was changed, and this stunned, pale, terrified girl was in no way like the fair childish maiden who had left that room with blithesome heart and step but a few brief hours before.

Even surly Lisschen looked compassionately at her as she unlocked the door, and brought in a tray containing only the bread and water prescribed as penance by Sister Maria.

"They say you are to go to the Convent tomorrow," whispered the old woman. "What is to be done?"

"Oh, Lisschen!" the words fell in terror from the

girl's pale lips. It seemed as if a ruthless hand had closed the gates of Paradise upon her, after one brief glimpse of its beautiful promises.

"I dare not stop, or they will suspect me," said the old woman hurriedly. "Thou must set thy wits to work. Tut—tut—all women are sharp enough when they love. Do not look so frightened. I will see the man, and tell him. There is still to-night."

"You will come again. You will tell me," implored the girl.

"Yes, yes; be sure of that. Hush, some one is coming!"

Some one! A grave, sombre figure, with a face whose stony calm seemed to-day to bear a look of repressed anguish more terrible than any outcry of physical suffering. What was it that made Gretchen shiver and turn white with sickening fear as that stony face, those burning eyes, looked at her now?

Was it memory, or dread, or that awakening to the tragedies beneath life's surface, that some faces teach us? She could not tell. She could not even have put her feelings into any words, or have expressed that wild and passionate longing which surged through her heart, and prompted her to throw herself down at those feet, crying only, "Save me, pity me, pardon me, for sake of your own youth—your own sufferings!"

Had she done so, the whole current of her life might have been changed. Had she done so, Nature might for once have broken through that icy calm, and in one moment of common weakness those two hearts might have met on one common ground of sympathy and comprehension. Had she done so—ah! who is to know the supreme moment when Fate stands beside us for the good or ill of all our future?

That moment came to Gretchen then. Unknowingly, she passed it by. The old dread and shrinking usurped the place of that strange impulse. It would come to her never, never again, save in the memory of some wild regret—save in that refrain to the broken music of life's song, "could I have known—could I have known!"

The cold, measured tones of the voice she knew broke in upon those thronging thoughts, harsher than its wont because of the new pain that throbbed in an old and unhealed wound—but what should the child know of that?

"It were better you were dead than that I should have to speak of you as it is my duty to speak—better you were dead than that I should have to tell you the history of your mother. Yet as a warning to yourself, as a voice that from some buried past of infamy and shame speaks out its misery and regret, so would I speak her story in your ears—for like the hand of doom her fate points the way to yours, since neither ignorance, nor warning, nor watchfulness, nor prayers can keep you in the innocence of childhood any more."

She paused as if for strength. Her hands were clasped against her heart, as if to still some inward pain that held there its seat of suffering.

Gretchen looked at her wide-eyed and trembling, with a terror the like of which she had never known.

The low, cold voice steadied itself; the eyes, pain-filled and tragic with such woe as the girl's young heart could not even dimly conceive, looked back at her once more.

"Your mother was young and fair, and innocent as yourself, when Fate threw across her path the man who was her life's curse. The time will come when you will know the meaning of my words, and remember that the warning your mother would not hear is uttered in your ears for your safety. Orphaned and disgraced your life has been and will be, not for fault of yours, but for that mother whom not even your love could console. There is that upon your life which sets you apart from all the honour and glory of womanhood. It is your penance for her, as it was hers for you. There is a gulf between you and the women whom you see around you. The shadows and sorrows that are your birthright can best be hidden under the secresy and silence, the penitence and prayers, that are the daily religion of all wounded hearts and sorrowful lives. You know the life for which you were destined—you have been guilty of wanton sin—of deceit,

disobedience, perjury. You can no longer be trusted to the freedom of home. Sterner and safer guardians will be yours from henceforth. That you should so have erred is a cause of deep sorrow to us all; but that you should have erred for the sake of a heretic, and one of that accursed nation whom you have been taught to abhor, is a crime unpardonable in your grandfather's eyes and in—mine."

Her voice faltered over that last word, as if strength failed her in its utterance; but the girl's broken cry rang out in piteous entreaty, and nerved her once again for the task that lay before her.

"It is my father's nation," she cried; "and, though he is nothing to me but a shadow, I cannot hate his race, and it is from one of that race that I have first received love, or pity, or kindness. I cannot forget that."

"*Your father!*" fell short and sharp, and with the bitterest contempt that ever rang in spoken words from those proud lips. "Your father!—he is your disgrace. Do not speak of him. Your father! It were better you were in your coffin now than living to claim kinship with a traitor and a coward. But you do not know"—her voice sank into a wail—"no, thank Heaven, you do not know. It is only your mother, your poor, betrayed, unhappy mother and she is dead; and you live; and the shadow of her fate is close upon your own. Ah, child! be warned; be warned in time. There is no help or hope for a woman who listens to a man's vows of love and—believes. They are our foes; our tyrants; our curse. It is from your mother's fate that I would have saved you; that I tried to save you. Child, child, in Heaven's name don't tell me it is too late!"

The anguish and entreaty of her voice startled Gretchen into a new wonder. Never had the cold, proud, passive woman spoken to her with such a voice, looked at her with such a face!

She rose slowly to her feet. Her eyes sank; the quick breath heaved her breast.

"Yes," she said very low, and trembling greatly, "it is—too late!"

A moment's silence, filled only by the beat of throbbing hearts. Then there was a gasp, a cry that, like the very soul and essence of undying pain, broke forth in one long moan.

Ere Gretchen's call of terror echoed it, the proud figure swayed, and fell face downwards on the chamber floor as lifeless as the dead on whom her lips had called.

# Book II.

## CHAPTER I.

### "LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM."

The Continental Express was dashing along over the dull, flat, marshy country towards the lagoon bridge that connects Venice with the mainland.

To untravelled eyes, that long wide span of dull, smooth water, from which, as by enchantment suddenly rise the islands and towers, and palaces of the once famous Queen of the Adriatic, is a veritable fairy scene. Two such eyes looked at it now from out the window of a coupé. The sun had not yet risen; but over the quiet waters lay a pale, silvery haze that gradually melted into a flood of translucent gold.

From amidst this transforming orb a glowing ball of fire shot suddenly forth and mirrored itself in the rippleless calm of that glassy sea, and, as if by magic, the water changed and glowed, and broke into one radiant glimmering sheet of colour that spread further and further, till the watching eyes grew dazzled at its splendour.

Here and there a red sail, or a speck of white, or the black outline of a gondola or "barca" gleamed suddenly forth as the silvery mist was swept away, and the golden beams shot downwards in a million points of light that radiated from one great centre. The train rushed swiftly on, and the specks of fluttered canvas melted softly into distance till they looked no bigger than a bird's wing that blends itself into the light of sea and sky, and so vanishes, and is lost.

There broke a low cry—like a child's note of wonder—from the girl who watched the scene. She turned to her companion. "Oh! but it is lovely—it is not like earth at all. It is as one dreams that Paradise will be!"

"It shall be Paradise for us," came the answer low and deep, as with the passion that stirs the heart and gives an eloquence to even simple words; "a Paradise that never serpent shall disturb—nor alien voices jar. Gretchen—sweetheart, come here and tell me you are happy."

"Oh! so happy," came from the trembling lips as she stole to his side, and nestled there with the sweetest, shyest grace that ever Love lent to woman. "So happy, that I wonder if I have ever—lived—till now."

"That is as it should be," he answered fondly. "And no one can drag you from me now, so we have nothing more to fear."

"I wonder if they are still angry?" said the girl sorrowfully. "Oh, I hope not; for now that I am so happy I cannot bear to think any one else is sad—or troubled—or in grief. You posted my letter, Neale, from Vienna?"

"Yes, love, and told them that we were off to England and that I had married you, and intended to take better care of you than the Church would have done."

"Sometimes, I think" said the girl slowly and thoughtfully, "that perhaps Tante did care for me a little. She seemed so strangely moved that day when she spoke to me; but then," she added brightly, "she declared that all men were false, and evil, and cruel; and I know she was not right, though of course she did not know you; and I could not expect her to think you were different."

He bent down and kissed the lovely lips that still were shy of kisses, and rarely gave them back. "She was a hard and cruel woman, or she would never have wished to consign you to a living grave. Do not let us talk of these people, sweetheart. You have done with them now."

"Yes," said the girl softly; "still—one day, if you do not mind very much, and when we have been married some time, you know, I should like to go back and see them. and tell them I bear them no ill-will, and that I am sorry I left them so abruptly and secretly; and that they must forgive me, for I am so happy, and you are so good. I think they would be glad to know that, even though you are English, and carried me away in such a strange manner."

"There is plenty of time to talk of going back," said Neale Kenyon hurriedly. "I have hardly had you in my care yet. Only four days—what is that? You should have no other thought or wish but of me, my little one."

"Nor have I—in my heart," answered the girl earnestly. "But it is because I am so happy that I feel a little sorry for them."

"Do not let such thoughts vex you," he entreated, "or I shall begin to think that you regret what you have done."

"You could not think that," she said simply. "For you know you are first to me always now. It seems as if you never could have been out of my life, you fill it so completely."

A brief silence followed those last words. They were nearing Venice now. From out the wide, still waters rose the magic city—shining in the morning sunlight with something of the old loveliness that now is only a long past dream. It was wrapped in silence like that of a long-forgotten world. The salt scents of the marshy shores stole in through the open windows —a great bell tolled heavily in the distance and startled the two dreamers, to whom life, as yet, was only love. "We must be nearly there," said Kenyon. "I am sure you are tired, sweetheart. Journeying all night in these rattling, jolting trains is no joke. I wonder how you manage to look so fresh and fair after it all."

For Gretchen's was that happy kind of beauty that nothing seems to disturb. Her cheeks were as softly flushed as a child's; her eyes as bright; her glorious hair only the lovelier for its loose and careless arrange-

ment. She had removed her hat, and the cool salt wind had blown it into a thousand rings and curls around her white forehead. Certainly no newly wedded bridegroom could have wished to look upon a fairer sight—despite the discomforts of travelling.

She drew herself away now from his arms and replaced her hat, while he fastened the long rich mantle, with its border of dark fur, around the slender form. Gretchen had been hastily equipped in Vienna for the journey, and, being quite ignorant of fashionable attire, the choice and ordering had devolved upon Neale, and he had acquitted himself very creditably. A simple cloth travelling dress and a rich mantle of plush and fur with hat to match, had transformed Gretchen into quite a fashionable young woman; and, despite what the proverb says about "beauty unadorned," believe me no man or woman either is capable of being unimproved by beautiful and artistic clothing. Gretchen in her gray linen dress had been charming; but Gretchen in velvet and furs, with her golden head and rich colouring, was simply bewitching. All the more so in that she was so utterly unconscious of her own charms, thus giving to her beauty its very crown of perfection.

Meanwhile the train steamed into the great, dreary station, and Bari made his appearance in the coupé to collect wraps and baggage. Giving him the keys, and leaving him the by no means pleasant task of waiting for the Custom House examination, Kenyon led Gretchen away to where the waiting ranks of gondolas lay in rows at the station steps.

To the girl it seemed the most wonderful sight possible. Before her stretched that still, wide, gleaming expanse of water. On the opposite banks were rows and rows of mildewed, dingy palaces, fantastic with carving and frescoes, and looming in dull sombreness of faded tints over the great lagoon.

But her wonder increased as their gondola shot swiftly out from the surrounding crowd, and glided in weird fashion over the reddened waters, and under

the arched bridges, and through the narrowing threads of smaller canals.

How silent it was! how hushed! how solemn! Venice looked like a city of the dead in these early hours of the spring day. Not a soul was stirring in the narrow, paved footways. The casements of the houses were still closed. The spell of sleep lay on the silent streets through which the waters softly stole; and when the gondola shot suddenly forth again into the wider current of the Grand Canal, and paused before the striped poles of the hotel landing-place, it seemed quite strange to Gretchen that any ordinary, every-day being should be there to welcome them or direct them to their rooms.

The hotel had formerly been a palace. The entrance-hall was paved with varied marbles, now dull of hue and worn by tread of many feet. Carved figures, rich in colouring, stood on either side the wide staircase, and great palms and bowls of flowers were placed in the dim recesses that led into the corridors. Like one in a dream, Gretchen noted all these things, as they followed their guide into a large square chamber with shuttered casements open to the water, and through which the morning sunlight gaily streamed.

Kenyon ordered some coffee to be brought them, and then, when the man had left, crossed over to the window and threw back the half-closed shutters.

"Look!" he said; and held out his hand to draw Gretchen to his side.

She gave a little cry of delight.

The wide sweep of golden water seemed to embosom an infinitude of tiny islands, and then spread and lost itself in the deep blue sea beyond. Before them, on the opposite bank, towered the lofty cupola and sculptured façade of a great church, and to right and left were other towers and domes, mingled with the red-brown roofs of houses; the masts and sails in the harbour; the foliage of some rare garden; the dusky, gliding shapes of gondolas carrying some freight of market produce from the Lido, or some devout worshipper to early mass.

It was a wonderful scene, a scene unequalled and alone amongst all the world's beauties, but to Gretchen's amazed and inexperienced eyes it was simply enchantment.

She gazed, and gazed, and gazed, with a delight never satiated. Her colour came and went—the pretty, pouting lips parted in a thousand breathless exclamations.

Kenyon smiled at her enthusiasm.

"I have been here before," he said. "It is some years ago. I was quite a boy, but I saw it for the first time by moonlight. That is the time; the old palazzos want the fairy spell of night to keep up one's illusion of Venice as we have heard of her."

"It seems wonderful to me," said Gretchen sadly, "that I know so little of the world, or the places in it; and," looking suddenly up at him, "I should have known nothing had it not been for—you."

A little flush hovered over her cheek. A tiny dimple peeped suddenly as she smiled back at his adoring eyes.

"I can hardly realise it yet," she said softly. "Always to be together—always to love you and know you love me. Nothing and no one to come between us, and such a beautiful perfect life before me. . . . I think sometimes I am in a dream—a long, bright, delicious dream, and that I shall awake to hear Sister Maria's harsh voice, and see Tante's face, so cold and calm, frowning at me."

Her eyes turned to the golden waters, the smile died off her lips, and left them pale and grave.

A shadow crossed Neale Kenyon's brow. His heart seemed to contract with the sharpness of a sudden fear.

"Don't talk of such things," he said hastily. "How often am I to tell you that you are quite safe! There will be only happy days for you now, sweetheart. 'Together,' that is the word for us to remember. We are in a city of dreams, and we will dream our own in it. There is no need to wake and remember."

"You talk," she said softly, "as poets talk."

He laughed a little. "They say all men are poets when they love. Perhaps you have made one of me. I wish I could tell you how I love you, Gretchen!"

The sweet, shy colour that he loved to see swept over the fair face. Once more her eyes turned to him instead of to the scene before them; turned and drew his own to meet their gaze, as the sun draws the flowers.

"Neale——" she began. But a sudden, sharp rap at the door startled her, and made Kenyon draw back a little from her side.

It was Bari with the luggage and the coffee. The invaluable valet opened the boxes; handed them their cups; suggested that Madame should remove her travelling wraps, and Monsieur retire to his dressing-room for his bath and shaving-water; in fact, brought all the prose of every-day life into a region of romance and an idyl of folly.

"Do you know," whispered Gretchen softly, as she took Kenyon by the lappet of his coat when the valet had withdrawn into the adjoining chamber, "do you know, Neale, I hate Bari!"

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE QUEEN OF WATERS.

THE *table d'hôte* was in full swing in the long dining-room of the Grand Hotel, with its mirrors of Venetian glass, and its glistening chandeliers, and that strange view of the water close to the long narrow windows. Faces of all nationalities looked stiffly, or wonderingly, or criticisingly at each other from opposite sides of the table. Voices in all languages chattered, and exchanged greetings or remarks.

Soup had been removed—there was a brief interval as the waiters were being told off to the different sections of the long table. A man, looking at the

scene with keen observant eyes, noted that two places opposite his own seat were just being occupied. His glance—momentarily arrested—stayed as if grave deliberation had succeeded a first impression: stayed—wandered—returned again, as one returns to something pleasant or puzzling, and finally rested on the object of attraction with candid, but very unusual, approval. A calm and serious nature, with a judgment rarely at fault, and a mind whose equable poise was rarely overbalanced by enthusiasm, it surprised himself that he should feel an interest so keen, an attraction so irresistible.

He saw only a girl in the very earliest spring-time of youth—a girl with a face that seemed to bring back all tender and gentle memories to a heart which had been sorely tried. A girl dressed in some soft dove-coloured fabric, with nothing about her to bespeak aught but girlhood save the thick gold band upon one slender finger, and the jealous, observant care of the man by her side. "A wife—that child—it seems a sacrilege"—so ran the thoughts of that quiet observer; and again and again, try how he might, he found himself wondering — theorising — romancing about the girl-bride. He could have told how sweet a trick of colour flushed or paled in the delicate cheek, how lovely a dimple lurked at the corner of the sweet, ripe mouth, what a silvery ripple of laughter it was that fell from her lips at some jest of her companion, and how the crown of hair that was wound in warm rich gold about the lovely head made him think of Guido's Magdalene.

Yet Adrian Lyle was by no means a man given to the study of women's looks, or to the folly of weaving romances in keeping with their beauty.

A remarkable-looking man—a man by no means in his first youth, and with marks of care and thought on the high, grave brow—a man whose personal appearance suggested nothing of his calling, and yet who, when that calling was mentioned, seemed just to suit it. Such was the Rev. Adrian Lyle, some time curate in the parish of Scandalthorpe, Surrey, but now rusticating, or ruralising, or whatever may be the

most suitable term for expressing that an over-zealous servant has incurred his superior's displeasure, without having come quite within the pale of that superior's spiritual jurisdiction. Adrian Lyle had been advocating strange doctrines—had spoken disrespectfully of sacerdotal garniture, and the folly of church millinery, as displayed in vestments, and sashes, and hoods, and stoles. He had objected to written sermons and the dry-as-dust pamphlets supposed to be eloquent of "sound doctrine." He had thought that religion might have a cheerful side as well as a solemn one, and that it was better to preach love of heaven than fear of hell. Clerical manners—clerical dress—clerical voice, were to him an unnatural assumption of superiority for the sake of yielding to people's prejudices.

"A clergyman should be so-and-so—he always has been so-and-so—he always must be so-and-so." That was a string on which he did not love to harp, or hear other people harping. Therefore, because of these and many other little peculiarities which made his parishioners uncomfortable, and roused them from that pleasant lethargy which his predecessors had never discouraged, the Rev. Adrian Lyle had been graciously advised that his health was delicate—that so ardent a toiler in the vineyard must need some rest after the burden and heat of the day, and that a few months' reprieve from his labours would be graciously extended to him by his Rector.

Adrian Lyle could read between the lines as well as any one. But as it was useless to rebel, he accepted the pleasant little fiction of overwork, and resolved to extend and enlarge his ideas by a period of foreign travel. Keenly alive to all that was beautiful in Art and in Nature; with critical as well as cultivated tastes; he knew that neither he, nor his work, nor the necessities of his office would suffer for a temporary rest.

He wanted, indeed, to brace his energies for fear of a coming struggle, and so he had come to the very home and stronghold of priestcraft, determined to fathom its evils as well as admire its virtues. He was

large-hearted and clear-headed enough to do both. The combination of qualities is somewhat rare.

The *table d'hôte* was half over when Adrian Lyle became suddenly aware that the lovely young bride was addressing himself. He started and collected his wits. Her husband was talking to a garrulous American who occupied the next seat. The beautiful young woman wanted some water, and the water-bottle stood beside Adrian Lyle. He bowed, and handed it across the table. She had spoken in German, but the tongue was perfectly familiar to him:

"Pardon me," he said, as he gave her the bottle, "are you aware that tourists are specially cautioned against drinking the water in Venice? It would be wiser if you mixed a little wine with it."

"But I never drink wine. I have never tasted it in my life," she said, in her pretty, frank way, and glanced appealingly at her husband.

He left his neighbour's last remark unanswered, and took up the subject, as brought under his notice by Adrian Lyle:

"You must not drink the water if it is impure. I shall have you laid up with typhoid fever, or something equally horrible. Thank you for the warning," he added politely to his opposite neighbour. "I had forgotten the caution in the guide-books."

He poured out half a glass of white Capri, and added a very little water, laughing heartily as Gretchen sipped it with evident distaste and not a little alarm.

"I am always reminded here of 'The Lay of the Ancient Mariner,'" said Adrian Lyle. "It really is a case of 'Water—water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.'"

Having broken the ice, he kept up a desultory conversation during the rest of the dinner. Neale Kenyon was not of that class of Englishman who brings his insular stiffness and prejudice on his travels, and looks upon an introduction as absolutely necessary to remarking that it is a fine day. He, therefore, chatted very readily and unconventionally with the young clergyman, perhaps not altogether sorry that he was able once more to exchange ideas in his native tongue.

Adrian Lyle, however, expected that the moment the meal was over the conversation would likewise terminate, and he rose from his seat and made the regulation bow, and sauntered into the entrance-hall, where a few scattered groups were discussing the advisability of going on the water.

The glass doors opened on a narrow stone terrace, from which a flight of steps ran down to the water's edge. A fleet of gondolas were lying about. The moon was clear and brilliant, and lights flashed here and there over the wide canal.

Suddenly a burst of music broke forth, and a large "barca" shot out from the shadows of the houses and paused before the hotel. The groups broke up, the doors were thrown open—every one moved to the terrace to listen.

The barca was brilliant with coloured lights, and full of men and women, the latter bare-headed and picturesque, with masses of bright beads about their bare, brown throats. They sang some of the "rimi populari" of the people—wild rhythmic choruses, which suited well the scene, and echoed far and wide over the dark and quiet waters. Kenyon and Gretchen, who also stood on the terrace, thought it delightful. The night air, however, was slightly chill, and Kenyon felt her shiver. Being still in the lover-like stage of husbandhood, when not a look, or gesture, or sensation of the beloved one is disregarded, he immediately hastened to fetch her cloak, and the girl was left by herself leaning over the stone balustrade, and listening with eager delight to the tenor, who had just stood up to sing a solo.

Some one said to her very gently, "Will you permit me to offer you this wrap? The night air in Italy is very keen and chill, especially in the early spring."

She looked up. It was the English clergyman. "I thank you," she said, in her pretty, formal German, "but my husband has just gone upstairs for my cloak."

"Then let me put this on those cold stones for you to lean upon," he said, and suited the action to the word. The pretty half-bare arms looked prettier still

leaning on that dark fur, and when she smiled and thanked him as simply as a child might have done, he was conscious of the strangest feeling that his life had ever experienced. A vague sense, as of misfortune to come—a sensation that half repelled and half allured, a thrill almost of fear, as if an invisible presence stood at hand, unseen but felt—such were the elements of that feeling, though strangled in their birth, dismissed with the petulance and impatience that any reasoning and reasonable mind bestows upon presentiments.

He did not speak to her again. He stood a little aside, and listened to the rich, melodious voice that blent itself with the faint wind and the sobbing of the water, as it rose and fell against the marble steps.

He listened, but the music was to him as an unknown tongue, and he was only conscious of saying over and over again: "What do the eyes of that child foretell?"

"Here is your cloak, my darling. I am afraid I have been very long, but Bari detained me."

It was Kenyon who spoke, and Adrian Lyle saw him wrap the rich furs round the pretty girlish figure, and watched the two pairs of eyes meet in a long and passionate glance—watched—and sighed involuntarily, as we sigh over a glimpse of happiness that is not for ourselves, and that, half unconsciously, we envy.

"That gentleman was kind enough to lend me this," said Gretchen, handing the coat back to Kenyon. "Will you tell him I do not need it now?"

Kenyon turned, and saw his aquaintance of the *table d'hôte*. That fact made his thanks warmer than they might otherwise have been. Adrian Lyle was Gretchen's possible saviour from typhoid fever, and, as such, to be cordially received.

Their conversation was resumed, though Gretchen could only play the part of listener, and resolve to make haste and study the English language attentively.

The music ceased, the performers came round for contributions, murmuring courteous thanks, as the coins dropped thick and fast. Then the barca was pushed off, followed by quite an attendant fleet of gondolas, and Gretchen and Kenyon and their new

friend seated themselves in the chairs, and the conversation became general.

Adrian Lyle's nature was essentially an attractive one, attractive by reason of its strength and its clear-headedness; the total absence of anything like artificiality; and the beautiful, large-souled charity which never lapsed into harsh judgment, even of what was erring and weak.

To a man like Kenyon, who was not by any means heroic, though well-meaning, and to whom the approbation of his fellow men was dear, there was something very pleasing about a companionship that at once put him on good terms with himself. The young man's good-nature had been rather a stumbling-block in his life. He hated to give pain, or to seem disobliging, and he hated to be pained himself. Principle was not his strong point, though he consoled himself for any evasion or lapse by saying "there were many fellows worse;" but this was negative praise, and of little use in any question of self-mastery. When, however, he talked to Adrian Lyle he felt an agreeable conviction that he was both clever, and well-informed, and justified in being on the best possible terms with himself. The conversation had been quite impersonal. No disagreeable questions had been asked as to his position or affairs. Gretchen had been softly inveigled into talk after a while, and had acquitted herself to his satisfaction, though, no doubt, she was very childish; but then, it was such an enchanting childishness that no man would have rebuked it, even were he less in love than Kenyon.

At last she proclaimed herself tired, and went off to bed, and Kenyon remained smoking and talking to his new friend, and arranging the various ways and means of "doing" the sights of the city.

There was no hurry. They could take them as easily as they chose. They had a month to idle away over churches and picture galleries, instead of the proverbial week of the frenzied tourist. And Adrian Lyle drew out a short and interesting programme for the first day, and even gave a half promise to play cicerone for it, before they parted for the night.

Then they exchanged cards and shook hands very heartily; but after Kenyon had left him, Adrian Lyle, in a sudden fit of restlessness, called a gondola and went out over the dark quiet waters of the Grand Canal. He watched the lights die out, the mists arise, the soft hush and peace of night steal over the sleeping city, and gradually the spell of its calm stole over himself. It was long past midnight when he came back to the hotel. A solitary figure was standing by the steps smoking. It drew back to let the visitor pass. Adrian Lyle gave one of his quick, searching glances at the face. Then he started, and looked again, but the man had turned his back.

"Who is that Italian?" Lyle asked of the porter, in English.

"That!" and the man followed the glance of the keen bright eyes somewhat stupidly—"oh! that—he is the attendant—valet—courier—what you call—of Milord Kenyon, who arrived to-day."

"Kenyon's servant," muttered Adrian Lyle as he walked on and ascended the stairs. "Hum—I must be mistaken! It can't be the man I thought. I am getting fanciful, I do believe!"

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## CHAPTER III.

### MOONLIGHT AND ROMANCE.

"We have been here a whole week," said Gretchen, leaning out of her window and looking over the broad expanse of rippleless water. "And it has rained almost every day. Mr. Lyle is right when he speaks of 'water—water everywhere.'"

"Yes," said Kenyon, raising himself lazily on one arm from the couch where he was stretched. "I don't know what we should have done without him. And he has really taught you some English at last."

"He makes me say the name of everything in English that I want to know," said Gretchen, laughing. "It is so funny; only I cannot what you call—construct—my sentences yet."

"That will come all in good time," said Kenyon graciously. "You are very quick at picking up things, my child."

"Am I?" she said, looking pleased at his praise. "Oh, I am so glad. I have always feared you might think me stupid. Indeed I think I am, for I cannot remember half of what we have seen, or the names of those pictures you have told me are so famous; and I look at the guide-book and I say I have seen San Marco, and the Doges' Palace, and the Campanile; I have been in Santa Maria della Salute, and the Frari; I have gazed at Canova's Monument, and Titian's altar-pieces, and the Church of the Jesuits; I have wandered over the Rialto Bridge, and roamed through the Accademia della Bella Arti; and yet when I begin to think of what I have seen, I get quite confused. Now, Mr. Lyle can tell you the chief point of interest in each place, and the very pictures in the Doges' Palace, while I only remember the—ceilings! Ah! but; Neale, are they not grand, those ceilings? And what rooms! How I should love to have seen them peopled by those wonderful nobles in their pomp and pride!"

"A pomp and pride that at best was very insecure," remarked Kenyon. "Fancy some one stealing up the 'Giants' Staircase' and just popping a letter in the lion's mouth. Then suspicion—spying—denouncing. Once denounced, the victim is seized—examined—sentenced. Nothing is heard again of his fate. He disappears. On the whole, my love, the Venetian nobles had not such a good time of it as you may suppose. To be of high rank and hold an office of State was to be an object of suspicion, jealousy, intrigue, and often a victim of treachery. But enough of Venetian history. Lyle has been at it all day. What does the weather look like to-night?"

"It is beautiful—superb!" cried Gretchen eagerly. "And warm, too, as summer. Will you take me out

in a gondola to follow the 'Campagnia dei pittori,' as you have so often promised? You can't say it is too cold to-night!"

"Very well," assented Kenyon; "and we will go by ourselves, and leave Lyle behind for once. I must say, though, he is chary enough of his company. He has never come anywhere with us unasked."

"He is very nice," said Gretchen simply, "and very clever, and very kind."

"Don't praise him too much, or I shall be jealous," laughed Kenyon, coming over to her side as she still leant against the open casement.

"Jealous," she echoed, regarding him with a little puzzled frown. "What does that mean?"

"It means that you are to have no thought or admiration for any one but me," he answered, smiling, as his lips kissed the pretty, puckered brow. "Is that hard to understand?"

"Oh, no; very easy," she sighed. "Indeed, I think it is because my heart is so full of you that I cannot remember half of what I see or hear. The Dandolo, and Faliero and Barbarossi, and all the other great and celebrated people fade into utter insignificance beside you, and my memory of you, and all the great and wonderful happiness you have brought into my life."

He kissed her hurriedly, but he did not meet her eyes.

"If we stay here talking we shall miss the music," he said. "I think I hear your favourite tenor already."

Adrian Lyle was standing on the terrace when he saw the two well-known figures approaching. Kenyon summoned one of the hotel gondolas, and assisted his wife in. They both nodded to their new friend, but gave him no invitation to join them.

"We are going to follow the music," said Gretchen, in her clear, young voice; and then the *gondolieri* raised their oars, and the black and gold prow of the gondola glided slowly from sight.

For a moment his grave eyes followed it musingly and half sadly. Then he summoned another with but

a single rower, and, drawing his broad felt hat down over his eyes, followed in the wake of that dusky shape, whose gold prow flashed like a beacon in the clear, pale moonlight.

Gretchen had thrown herself back on the soft cushions; her hand stole into Kenyon's; her soft eyes drank in the magic and beauty of the scene with all a child's wonder and enjoyment of what is seen for the "first time."

There is no after sorcery to compare with the magic of those words.

Coloured lights were flashing over the water, revealing dusky palaces; the dark, gliding shapes of gondolas shot hither and thither, or idly floated like their own. Kenyon had ordered the men to row them beyond the usual extent of the "water-drive," and, after a while, they found themselves approaching the mirage-like Islands of the Lagoons. Here the water was almost deserted, and the far-off stretch of the Euganeian Hills looked like a shadowy belt set in a silver frame of snow and moonlight.

The gondoliers paused on their oars. A soft shadow of cloud passed over the sky, enveloping the scene in a cloak of mystic darkness; a darkness relieved here and there by some straggling moonbeam.

A moment, and then the stillness was broken. The hushed air seemed to tremble with a sound that thrilled the very darkness, the sound of a great and glorious human voice. Gretchen started and caught her breath, but the words she would have uttered died on her lips, and left her tranced in the ecstasy of listeniug.

The soul of the singer seemed to fill that throbbing melody and let itself loose in passionate prayer—prayer that rose in higher, and purer, and grander utterance till the waves of souud found wings that bore it upwards to the vaulted sky, aud there its last faint echo died.

Gretchen turned to her husband. The tears were falling down her cheeks; her lips were pale and trembling.

"Oh!" she cried, "who is it? What is it? It seems to draw me, and draw me, like invisible hands. It is like nothing earthly at all."

"No, it is not," he answered, also strangely moved. "But, no doubt, it is one of the singers from the churches. Some of them have magnificent voices. I dare say he is trying the effect of some new mass."

"I did not think there could be such a voice except in Heaven," Gretchen said softly, and her eyes tried to pierce the shrouding darkness. There were two or three barcas and a gondola or two scattered about. Doubtless the music had attracted them, but they began to drift away one after the other, and Kenyon ordered his own men back by way of the Canareggio. "Ah," he sighed contentedly, as he looked at Gretchen's lovely face, "this is Venice as it should be. The Venice of one's dreams. Moonlight—music—fair women—love. It is like a dream. Even you"—and he touched her hand softly—"even you look like a dream."

She turned to him with soft and serious eyes. "Let us go on—dreaming," she said. "Paint me a picture of what Venice was."

"Very well," he said, meeting her fancy with equal readiness. "Time has gone back—she is still Queen of the Adriatic. In yonder Palazzo rules some mighty Doge. He steps down the marble stairway to where the gilded and canopied gondola of state awaits him. It is a gala night. From every marble palace, and at every flight of steps glide forth the gondolas of the nobles. They advance and float in stately procession over the glittering waters. Can you not see the fairy fleet, brilliant with lights and costly robes and dazzling jewels, and the beauty of fair women? The air is full of music, and voices rise and fall with the silvery cadence of its rhythm. In yonder gondola, with its dusky hood, some fair dame reclines, her beauty jealously hidden from the crowd's admiring eyes. Some one is beside her. Her lover—or a bridegroom newly wedded. He is whispering vows of eternal adoration. In the soft gloom her liquid eyes look up to meet his own. He takes her white hand and raises it to his lips. He tells her all

else is a dream but love, such love as theirs—for they are young, and the world is very fair, and life—ah, how beautiful life can be when one loves!"

The dying cadence of some distant music fell across his last words like a sigh, and a momentary silence reigned in that charmed region of moonlight and romance. Kenyon's eyes sought that sweet child-face. "Why, Gretchen—tears?" he murmured in surprise. "Have my fancies made you sad?"

"Oh, no," she said, half smiling, and shaking the bright drops from her long lashes; "not sad, only——"

"Only what, sweetheart?"

"Does love—last?" she asked, timidly raising the childish eyes to his; but they were not childish now, only very earnest and very solemn.

"Of course it does," he answered her, "such love as ours. What could change that, my own?"

"I do not know," she answered simply. "Nothing, it seems now; but those lovers of whom you spoke—they too were happy once, and on these same waters breathed these same words of ours! And yet——"

"But they are dead, sweetheart, and so love is over for them."

"Ah, no," she interrupted quickly. "Do not say that, Neale. Love cannot die, it seems to me. For it is of the soul, and the soul lives, and all in it that is pure and beautiful and true lives also, and, if I died to-night, I know I should take to heaven your memory and my thoughts of you, and there they would be with me, waiting—waiting—till God gave you back to me again."

A child—well, Neale Kenyon had called her that and thought of her as that often enough, but as he listened to her words and looked down at the rapt and serious face, he knew that it was no child's heart he had won to his keeping, no child's soul that looked forth from those softly solemn eyes. And just as a child's innocent words touch boldly the key-note of some long-hidden truth, so did Gretchen's words strike loud and clear the chords of an unchanging faith and thrill his soul with their haunting echoes.

"You love me far too well," he muttered hoarsely. "Indeed, child, I am not worth it. No man is."

"But you are, or I believe you so, and that is enough for me. How you have changed all my life! Why, you are like a magician who suddenly says 'Wish,' and then everything is beautiful. I know life cannot always be a dream, but I am too happy to wake—yet. I cannot fancy that such things as sorrow, and shame, and misery exist; but I am sure that men and women can become great and heroic through love, for it makes one strong and brave, and ready to dare all things. See how brave it made me?"

The innocent words were like a dagger thrust. He laughed a little constrainedly. "My child, you are like all your sex, only too ready to deify your idol of clay. You won't reason, you only feel."

"You have told me there is no reason in love."

"No more there is, sweetheart. A man's general strength of character may serve him in most other cases, but when he loves he is mastered."

"As you were, Neale?"

"As I was, little witch, and as many another of my sex has been, and still is to be."

"Mr. Lyle says a man can never do anything at variance with his nature. If it is weak, shifty, false, so will it control and guide his actions."

"Ah—Mr. Lyle," muttered Kenyon. "He is a different type of man from me. All characters are not alike, any more than all natures. As one is, one is. It is absurd to expect a man to be self-denying, heroic, unselfish, when Nature has denied him the very faculties needful for such virtues. As well blame him that his features are not classical, or his height falls short of majesty. Now, Adrian Lyle is a man cut out on grand lines. He is meant for great things, and he unconsciously dwarfs ordinary mortals into insignificance or meanness. He can't help doing it. Those grand eyes of his look beyond the mere level of petty human motives and soar to heights that dazzle ordinary powers of vision. Mr. Lyle could not do a mean or selfish action. He simply could not

But then what it costs him nothing to avoid, it might cost a weaker nature a lifetime of struggling and suffering. The human mind is a very complex machine, my child. Some people never master its mechanism, and are consequently always more or less faulty of action. Others can dissect, organise, arrange it at a glance, and with scarce an effort."

"Well," said Gretchen, with a little sigh, "if your character is not as grand as Mr. Lyle's, it is more sympathetic, and you do not frighten me as he does."

"Does he frighten you, sweet?"

"He is so very, very good," she answered gravely. "And I think, if he knew what I have done, and how I deceived and disobeyed my relatives, he would think me very wicked."

"For Heaven's sake," cried Kenyon hurriedly, "don't ever tell him anything about—that. Surely he hasn't asked you?"

"Oh, no, he never asks one anything—only leads one on to tell him what is in one's heart. I would not mind confessing anything to him, but I dread having to tell the priests."

"You must confess only to me now," said Kenyon tenderly. "I will not have any other man, be he twenty times a priest, stepping between your heart and mine."

"And I do not wish it—now," she answered with sudden passion, as she turned her eyes to his. "For you are all in all to me—lover, husband, priest; sometimes, I think, my heaven too, for there would be no heaven for me where you were not."

"Oh, hush, hush!" he cried. "Do not say such things. Indeed, I am not worth thoughts like yours; and some day—some day——"

"No, no," she interrupted; "for us there must be no 'some day' when I shall regret or you will repent. Love like ours can never change and never die."

It was the old, sweet story in its oldest, sweetest form. The young idolatry of passion—the first outspring of a nature formed to love, and to love with

the blindness, and the pathos, and the trust, that are at once love's blessing and love's curse.

The cold years of isolation had but left her all the more eager for tenderness and sympathy, and lent to both a spell far stronger than they would otherwise have held. Such love as surrounded her now was like a charmed and sacred thing. Its beauty grew with every hour; its sanctity with every thought. The leaves of her soul opened one by one, as a flower to the sunlight; and drank in joy, and colour, and fragrance with each day that passed.

The change that had come to her sometimes startled Kenyon himself. It was as if a lovely statue had warmed and blushed with life, and moved beside him, drinking in new thoughts, new hopes, new raptures every hour. Her whole face and form had gained new loveliness, and seemed to thrill with the glory and gladness of the life she breathed; and, with this new-created glow and fire throbbing in brain and pulse, she would turn to the creator of it all in one dumb, passionate impulse of worship, and weep for very joy upon his breast.

He was her world—her life. He might have been her soul and conscience too, had he so willed. In the limitless adoration she yielded, his word was her law. It might have made a great nature humble to be so loved; but to a lesser one the consciousness of so little meriting it, was a constantly-recurring sting.

Kenyon would rather she loved him as other women had loved him. Poor, blind little Gretchen! who thought that for him the world had never even held "other women"—that she to him, as he to her, was "first and last, and all."

They had been silent a long time. Their gondola had drifted away from the track of the others. In the violet dusk of the sky the stars had slowly gathered, lighting it from end to end with profuse and prodigal brilliance.

"Do you know, Gretchen," said Kenyon suddenly, "that I have often longed to ask you a question; only, somehow, I feared you would not understand? You know nothing of social conventionalities. Right

or wrong to you are simply based on feeling; not on the prejudices of the world. Is your love of the nature that would make sacrifices?—that would only ask to make me happy, and, doing so, find its highest content?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "Failing your happiness, it would seek nothing more on earth. You are my world—my life too, I think."

Her voice trembled greatly, and his own was not steady either, as it answered those wistful, passionate words:

"And you shall be my world too. There is something sacred in a mutual vow, dear heart, and love like ours is sacred, as neither form nor rite could make it. You—you do not understand. No; why should you? You would not be happy without me—ah, I know it!—nor I without you. And life is a poor thing at best, and its chances of happiness are few. Let us hold ours fast and close while we can."

And something in her heart seemed to echo, cold and chill, "while we can!"

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## CHAPTER IV.

### "WHO ART THOU THAT JUDGEST?"

A HORRIBLE doubt was gnawing and tugging at the strings of Adrian Lyle's uneasy conscience. As a rule, when he doubted any one or anything, he went straight to the point and solved the matter by direct investigation. Yet now, for the first time in his life, he hesitated. He would not put the question he wished, because he feared the answer.

"She is such a child," he would say to himself again and again; "why, a baby could deceive her, and what does she know of forms and ceremonies? Only I wish—I wish I dared ask how and where she first met Kenyon! I could master her by a word or look. I should hear the whole innocent story from

her own innocent lips; but I have grown a coward, I think, for I dare not. Better the evil one suspects than the evil one knows. Now by what odd chance was she thrown across my path? Just that my restless, suspicious mind should invent all sorts of theories and histories about her. I might not have been so suspicious had it not been for that servant. He is a rascal if ever there was one. . . I wonder if Neale Kenyon suspects that the fellow writes to his uncle, Sir Roy. It is an odd affair altogether. Four days—four days! I wish with all my heart I had never heard that expression from Bari. Four days! and she is so innocent and unsuspecting. But there must be a mistake. It was a hurried marriage, no doubt; but still it was a marriage. Why, the greatest villain on earth would not have the heart to deceive that child; and Kenyon is a gentleman, though somewhat weak and yielding of nature; the sort of man to shuffle with temptation, not to resist it."

Then he threw away the end of his cigar, and walked away from the terrace where he had been watching the gondolas.

"I do not think this place agrees with me," he said to himself. "I am getting hipped, melancholy, out of sorts. I shall go on to Rome."

As he disappeared up the marble staircase, the gondola containing Kenyon and Gretchen came up to the landing-place.

The girl put her hand to her eyes as if to shield them from the dazzling light. She was still in a half dream; too happy and too engrossed even to note the absence of that grave and courteous cavalier who, of late, had been always at hand to welcome or speed her, remove her wraps, or render her any of those little services or attentions which come so naturally from some men to some women.

But Adrian Lyle, as he saw her, turned and met her in the vestibule.

"Have you enjoyed it?" he said; and there was ill-repressed curiosity in his voice and eyes.

"Oh, more than I can say," the girl answered eagerly. "But do you know, Mr. Lyle, when we had

left the crowd and got away from the Grand Canal altogether, we heard the most exquisite singing you can imagine. I have heard nothing like it in the churches, or anywhere. I wish so much I knew who it was! I shall never forget the voice as long as I live."

"You will doubtless hear many better in course of time," Adrian Lyle answered carelessly. "Italy abounds in beautiful voices."

"I think," she said solemnly, "there could be no other like that in the world."

They moved up the staircase together. Bari had detained Kenyon a moment.

"Pardon, Monsieur," he said in a low voice as he took up the wraps and cushions, "but some visitors have arrived at the hotel this evening, of whom I have heard Sir Roy speak. Their name is Graham."

Kenyon started as if he had been shot.

"Good Heavens!" he cried, "what a horrible nuisance! Of course, it would never do to meet them. Get everything ready to start to-morrow morning, Bari. We will go on to Rome."

"Yes, Monsieur, and you will explain to — Madame?"

"Of course, of course; and do, like a good fellow, get us off without meeting those people. It would never do—never!"

"Monsieur may trust to me. Breakfast shall be served in Monsieur's apartment, and the gondola will be in waiting directly afterwards. The train starts at nine in the morning."

"The earlier the better," said Kenyon. "Bring me up some soda and brandy to my room, Bari, and don't mention my name in the hearing of these people, if you value your place."

"Monsieur shall be obeyed."

There was the usual bustle and confusion going on at the railway station. Porters and commissionnaires were rushing about; hotel dignitaries were conducting departing visitors to their carriages, and performing, or superintending, all ticket-taking, luggage-labelling, and other arrangements on their behalf.

Gretchen and Kenyon were comfortably settled in their carriage. The former was gazing out of the window at the hurrying crowd, and laughing at the general confusion. Suddenly she gave a little cry and leant forwards.

"Mr. Lyle—oh, Mr. Lyle, are you going too? Do come in here. There is plenty of room!"

She had opened the carriage door in an instant, and Kenyon, leaning forward, saw the tall, familiar figure standing on the platform.

"My dear fellow, do come in," he cried. "Who would have thought of seeing you? I left a note at the hotel telling you we were off, and excusing ourselves for not taking formal leave."

Adrian Lyle was beside them now, his foot on the high step, his face a little paler and graver than its wont, looking back at Gretchen's lovely, excited eyes. A passing official bade him hurry—the train was just off. In another second he had swung himself up and into the carriage, and was tossing his portmanteau and rugs in various directions.

"It is odd, meeting you like this," he said, with a little hard laugh. "I only made up my mind to quit Venice last night, and I, too, left a note of farewell for you."

"And why are you leaving?" asked Gretchen eagerly. "Neale keeps saying it doesn't agree with him—it is damp and chilly, and that he will bring me back a few weeks later, when the weather is warm. I was so sorry to come away. And did you think it did not agree with you, Mr. Lyle?"

"Yes," said Adrian Lyle slowly, and not meeting the frank, sweet eyes. "I began to find it—did not —agree with me."

"Well, I hope you are going to Rome also," said Gretchen gaily, "for I am sure you are better than any guide-book, and you can explain all about the wonders of the Eternal City to me. I am so dreadfully ignorant. I thought I should find it just as I learnt in the history; but Neale laughs and says the Palatine is a ruin; and so is the Colosseum; and the Forum is only a few broken arches; and Rome is all

dust and dirt, except where the new English quarter has sprung up. Octavia would not know it were she to come back to it, and it would break great Cæsar's heart. Is that true?"

"Yes," said Adrian Lyle, "it is quite true. Time does not stand still, you know, and Rome is the mother of the world. But I have yet to see her as she is. I can only tell you travellers' tales about her. The Rome of your history and your fancy is separated by two thousand years of war, and siege, and famine, and pestilence from the Rome you will see."

"Now we are off," said Kenyon, as the train glided out of the great damp station, and shot out over the gleaming water, all rosy and golden with the morning light.

Gretchen looked longingly back at the city.

"Good-bye, Venice," she murmured. "Beautiful, wonderful Venice! I wonder if I shall ever see you again?"

"Of course you will, child," said Kenyon, a little pettishly. "I have told you we shall come back. Why, we haven't seen half of it yet. There is the Lido, and the Murano and the Armenian Convent—the place where Byron stayed, you know—and—and—oh, heaps of places!"

"What made you leave so suddenly?" asked Adrian Lyle, fixing his calm, gray eyes on the young man's face.

Kenyon looked slightly confused. "Well, as Gretchen says, it was so confoundedly damp and chilly. It is too early in the year for Venice. Rome will be just right."

"Are you going straight through, or do you rest at Florence?"

"We shall stay there to-night if we are tired," said Kenyon. "I know it very well. I don't care to go over the old ground again. With the exception of the Duomo and the two galleries, one might as well be in an English town now—English dresses, English horses, English carriages, English faces. That's what Florence is. The Cascine is a regular Hyde Park; so

is Lung' Arno, with its strings of carriages, and riders, and promenaders. The only places I liked about Florence were Tivoli and Vallombrosa, and they are both a long way out of it."

"Well, we will not stop there," said Gretchen gaily. "I know nothing of it at all, it was not in my history. I am content to go on to Rome. Are you, Mr. Lyle?"

She included him so innocently and naturally as their companion, that he felt it would have been almost churlish to refuse her. He shook off his gravity with an effort. He declared himself perfectly content to abide by their plans, and wondered, with a little ironical wonder, why Fate had so chosen to overthrow his own.

Having once thrown off his gravity, he seemed his usual, natural self. His former ease of manner returned—only he rarely addressed himself to Gretchen, though he listened to her lightest words with the most courteous attention. His feelings were well under control, and no one looking at him, or listening to him, would have suspected what a dissatisfied, irritated spirit was wrestling within him for the mastery; was filling his mind once more with confusion of doubt, and forcing the simplest word or most innocent expression into one dark channel of disbelief.

"There is something wrong," that tormenting voice told him. "There is something wrong—try as you may to doubt." "There is nothing wrong," his masterful nature would indignantly reply. "There can be nothing wrong. I won't believe it."

And Gretchen's guileless eyes would look at him, and her sweet lips smile; and that hateful, cruel doubt would be crushed fiercely, remorsefully down, for the look smote him as might the look in a child's eyes, who frankly gives trust and knows not that betrayal is at hand. Besides—as he told himself again and again—there was no doubt but that the two were passionately in love with each other, and Kenyon—if he was a little weak and easy-going—was certainly not vicious. To be irresolute and yielding

was very different from being downright wicked. The young man had good points—very good points. He was, to all appearances, rich, free, and independent. Why, then, should that first trivial suspicion which a chance word had fired, persistently charge itself with added doubts and increasing uneasiness?

"My dear fellow!" broke in Kenyon's voice at this juncture, "are you composing a sermon, that you look so grave? I have spoken to you three times, and you have not answered me once."

"I—I beg your pardon," stammered Adrian Lyle. "I had lost myself in a maze of fancies for a moment. I really did not know you were speaking to me."

"What were the fancies?" asked Gretchen, turning to him. "Tell me; I should so like to hear them."

He looked at her, and a faint tinge of colour came into his pale, grave face.

"I was only thinking," he said gently, "how few of us—if any—have really strength to master a great temptation."

"Temptation, it seems to me, is nothing but a combination of circumstances which we have never sought to bring about, and certainly can't avoid," said Kenyon gloomily. "There are forces too strong for a man. He yields simply because he can't help it, and then he is accused of not resisting what he feels is wrong."

"There are forces that some call too strong for them to resist," said Adrian Lyle quietly. "I have thought—it may be I am wrong—but I have thought that it was simply because they never made the effort."

"They may make the effort and Fate will overthrow it," said Kenyon.

"Ah," said Adrian Lyle with that odd, puzzling smile that sometimes lighted up his face. "I forgot—Fate!"

For he remembered now why he had resolved to leave Venice, and how the resolution had been as useless as the effort to execute it.

He remembered, and he said to himself, "Who art thou who judgest another? Take heed that thou thyself may not fall!"

## CHAPTER V

### TWO SIDES TO A QUESTION.

KENYON had said that night, "We will stay at Florence on our way back," and to Gretchen his lightest wish was law. The next morning, therefore, they were once more speeding along towards Rome, and again was Adrian Lyle their companion.

Kenyon complained somewhat of his eyes, and Gretchen had insisted upon bandaging them from the light, and the young fellow was lying lazily back on the seat amidst rugs and cushions, and telling Gretchen that he trusted to her for a full and particular decription of the scenery as they sped along.

She was in the gayest of spirits. The previous day had been damp and rainy; but now, as they left Florence, the sun was shining brilliantly, and the cool, rich air seemed to make the girl's pulses throb, and her whole frame glow, and bring such light and glory to her face as made her indeed a "joy to look at."

"I believe Florence is beautiful, after all," she said, straining her eyes to catch sight of the yellow water, and the white villas and villages that are scattered among the shadows of the mountains as thick as summer lilies.

"Say rather its environs," murmured Kenyon lazily; "'tis a case of the enchantment of distance, my child."

"I think you are somewhat disposed to rob the city of her just dues," interposed Adrian Lyle. "If you could see her now you would be inclined to change your opinion——"

"That the Arno is yellow and muddy, instead of silvery clear; that the streets are, to say the least of it, malodorous; that it has rained for a fortnight with a steady downright persistence that would put England to shame; that the most enthusiastic of travellers' tales are responsible for many erroneous

impressions; that 'Firenze la bella' is a very anglicised modern edition of

> Where, white and wide,
> Washed by the morning's water-gold,
> Florence lay on the mountain side."

"Oh, hush—heretic!" laughed Adrian Lyle. "We will not have any of your modern cynicisms to-day. It is a pity you cannot see the 'morning's water-gold' for yourself. But at least you can feel the air. Is it not delicious?"

"And the hills are like silver with the olives," cried Gretchen rapturously; "and the Arno looks like molten gold; and the plains are so fresh and green that it makes one thankful for the rain you abuse. Is he not ungrateful, Mr. Lyle?"

"Perhaps he does it for a purpose," smiled her companion. "To draw out your own enthusiasm, Mrs. Kenyon."

For a moment Gretchen looked at him as if bewildered; then grew rosy red.

"I—I beg your pardon," she said, laughing; "but it did seem to me so funny to be called—that. I forgot for a moment that I had a new name; it seems scarcely possible that a fortnight ago I was—only Gretchen."

A sudden cloud came over the brightness of her face. Kenyon moved uneasily on his seat.

"My dear, things are changed since then, remember."

"You were sorry, no doubt, to leave your parents?" said Adrian Lyle gently.

"She had none to leave," interposed Kenyon, with sudden sharpness. "My wife is an orphan. So much the better for me," he went on in English, "I shall not be worried with a mother-in-law."

Adrian Lyle looked at him in some surprise. He had noticed before that any allusion to his marriage was sure to provoke a sharp or irritable rejoinder.

"On dangerous ground again," said the old suspicions, rising and facing him now, as they had risen and faced him many times before, in silent hours

of night, in solitary hours of day. "He is so frank in all else; why not here?"

"There may be an advantage for you in such a case," he said at last, answering Kenyon's remark in his own language. "But I feel sorry always for the man or woman who is motherless; and your wife is so very young."

He said that as an afterthought, looking at the sweet child-face that was regarding them both, feeling with all the force and fervour of an honest and most tender nature, that there was something strange and pathetic about this lonely young life, given so early and unconsciously to trials and chances of which she knew nothing, with only a young man's rash, hot-headed, impulsive love on which to rest for guidance, for happiness, for her whole life's weal or woe.

"I begin—a little to understand," said Gretchen in her pretty, broken English. "You must talk not secrets before me now. And, indeed, I am not so young," she went on, lapsing into German; "and Neale is to me all and everything; and if I have been lonely, and yearned for tho love of those who are for ever dead and lost, I cried no more when once I found what love was left. And he came just like a fairy prince, and took me into this beautiful new world, and we shall remain there always now—for ever, and ever, and ever!"

"Let us hope so," said Adrian Lyle heartily. "It is not every one in this world who is fortunate enough to find a fairy prince, or—princess."

Her frank, sweet words had charmed away the demon of suspicion once more.

"I am a grave and sedate person," he went on presently, "and I lost my rose-coloured spectacles long ago—lost them in a fight with the sin, and shame, and suffering that are so constantly about my path. But I have replaced them by glasses of neutral tint which, if not so pretty, are at any rate more useful. Ah," he broke off suddenly, "how beautiful those mountains look in this light! Do you know that a poet once called that Apennine range the

'borderland of Paradise;' it is a pretty fancy, is it not?"

"Yes," said Gretchen dreamily; "it must be a beautiful life, a poet's. To draw one's thoughts from God, and make His works immortal just by a line—a few simple words—that all the world will hear of and remember!"

"Beautiful, yes, but a sad life too," said Adrian Lyle; "for there are many deaf ears in the world, and more who forget than remember. And many a poet has poured out the gold of his soul at thankless ears, and sung his songs to the jeers and derision of an age who could not understand him. Indeed, to be a poet in the true sense of the word, is to be something very different to the rhyming machine, whose watch-cry is 'popularity;' is indeed to suffer for and with humanity with tenfold sympathy. To ask for bread and receive stones—to look on the children of the world as the Master looked at Jerusalem, lamenting even as He lamented, 'Ye would not.'"

"I remember," said Gretchen timidly, "that the priest in my Church used to warn me against believing what he called 'poet's fables.' Goethe and Heine, and even your great Shakespeare are to me only names. Neale has told me about Dante, and Byron, and Shelley; one cannot but hear of them here in this land. And are all the beautiful things they wrote—fables? It seems to me there must be truth in them—a great deal of truth—if fanciful in its expression."

"Yes," said Adrian Lyle quietly, "there is truth—truth learnt in suffering, immortalised by pain. The outcry of struggling souls, the laments of tortured hearts, the struggle to interpret for others the visions that seem inspired of Heaven, the dreams of deathless love, the anguish of defiant sin: these are truths, however clad; the truths of one common humanity speaking to individual hearts in one common language of joy or sorrow—of hope or pain."

"Are all the priests of your Church like you?" suddenly asked Gretchen.

The blood flushed warm and bright to that grand, calm brow of Adrian Lyle.

"No," he said curtly, and then smiled as if some sudden thought amused him. "A priest is but a man, you know, and men are fallible and unstable creatures. The mere fact of being consecrated to the Church's service does not turn one into a pure and sinless being, any more than the sacredness of our calling places us above the needs of the flesh. I think there are more erroneous impressions abroad respecting what is called 'priesthood,' than about any other calling or profession. For myself I frankly tell you I am considered too liberal-minded and eccentric to be in favour with my colleagues. To be a follower of Christ is to my mind a very different thing to following men's doctrines and dogmas. The Rector of my own parish is one of those halting and two-faced dignitaries who have done so much harm for religion, with the very best intention of glorifying the Church. He is, in fact, a Ritualistic parson of advanced Roman Catholic ideas. Now I am no stickler for one form of religion as superior to another; but I say the simpler the better, and the less the 'man' is dragged in and the Deity left out, the more nearly do we approach the standard of Christ's own teaching. To march about in scarlet trappings one day, and violet another, and white another, is no way of glorifying the Creator. To set more importance upon these outward symbols than on the service itself—as I have known many a Ritualist priest do—is, to my mind, both foolish and sinful. In your Church these are essential parts of the ritual. In fact, I very much doubt if the Roman Catholics would consider religion as religion, without ceremonious processions, banners, candles, robes, and censers, flowers and images, and decorations of all sorts. But with us it is different, is it not, Kenyon? Do you agree with me that this 'halting between two opinions' is a cowardly thing at best, and is slowly sapping the life-springs of all that was best and truest in religion?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I have never given the matter much thought," said Kenyon languidly.

"I rather like High Church services myself. Music and flowers, and vestments, and all that sort of thing. It's really more lively, you know, when you come to think of it, and I never can see why you parsons should want to make religion out as a gloomy sort of thing. The other way draws best, depend upon it."

"True," said Adrian Lyle sarcastically. "It brings more people to the services, and more contributions to the offertories. Fashion does for religion nowadays what martyrdom did of old. Gloomy! Who talks of religion being gloomy? It should be with men and about them as are the air and the sunshine. It should make our bright days brighter, our sad ones less mournful. It should shed the glow of its gentle charity about and around our lives. Gloomy!—why, the earth is but one shroud of sin and sorrow over all the dead and futile hopes of life; the sun that disperses that gloom, that revives those hopes, that bids us raise our weary heads, and cheers our fainting spirits, is religion. Gloomy! Am I gloomy? Can I not enjoy life, art, nature, companionship, and affection? If I preach to others, Heaven knows it is in all humility, and only perhaps out of comprehension of their needs, and gratitude that I can so comprehend them. But think you I would adopt clerical cant, or clerical voice, or affect the virtue of superiority, knowing that I too have needs to satisfy, sins to repent of, faults to fight against, weaknesses to avoid, temptations——?"

He stopped abruptly. He saw that Gretchen's eager eyes were gazing at him with a rapt and wondering delight.

"Forgive me," he said, with a forced laugh, "I really am taking my office upon me and beginning to preach."

"I think you are one of the few parsons who could preach a sermon worth listening to," said Kenyon, with an indulgent smile.

"And I," said Gretchen in a strange, little, fluttered voice, "I wish, Mr. Lyle, that if what you have said is your religion, you would teach it to me."

"My child," he said, very softly, as his luminous

eyes turned gravely to her face, "religion is scarcely a thing to be taught. Love is its soul and spirit; love for what is freely given—the love of a Heavenly Father watching over us, caring for us, guarding us. When we once realise that, all else is easy. Every heart has its own form of worship, and brings its own offerings. It wants not teaching or instruction It knows that He who created can also comprehend, and it fears not to pour out its weakness, its longings, its faults and failings, to the ear of Infinite Mercy."

"An ideal worship," murmured Kenyon, "the offspring of enthusiasm—not of reason."

But Gretchen's eyes grew dark and humid. "A beautiful worship," she said, "and a beautiful faith. I wish it were mine."

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## CHAPTER VI.

### SUNSET ON THE PINCIO.

It was midnoon now.

The sun shone hot and bright over the crimson clover fields, and a hundred pretty pictures showed themselves to Gretchen's watchful eyes as they gazed out untiringly over the fair, green country. A knot of peasants at work; a group of children, brown-faced and dark-eyed; the white walls and houses of scattered villages that looked like toys set down amidst the grandeur of the wide-spread hills; a flock of goats feeding, tended by some youthful peasant; the dusky ruin of some ancient castle, with the moss and lichen of ages fringing and covering its brown walls and broken turrets; the gleam of sun-burnished water; the chance glimpse of some dark verdant nook, such as Faun or Dryad might once have loved to haunt; and here and there, crossing and re-crossing each other in endless succession, the pale green ropes of the vines, stretched from bough to bough of the short and tufted

trees; and around and about all these pictures, the framework of the purple mountains, that, like protecting arms, held the whole wide country in their soft embrace.

The little party were very silent. Kenyon had fallen asleep; Adrian Lyle, seated opposite to Gretchen, was absorbed, like herself, in watching the changing scenes. They were new to him as to her, though he saw them with maturer vision and less fervour and excitement of feeling.

He was thinking how the one dream of his life had been to visit the Eternal City, and yet, now that he was about to realise that dream, not one emotion, such as he had anticipated, thrilled his heart; rather, a weight and a dread lay upon it, and he found himself dimly wondering whether a day might not come when he should regret this realisation more deeply than ever he had longed for it.

"Was the sea really here—once?" asked Gretchen, as they sped across the vast Campagna. "It seems scarcely possible to believe it."

Adrian Lyle raised himself with a start.

"The sea—yes; undoubtedly. They say that its present state is due to powerful volcanic agency. You can see that red tufa everywhere, besides innumerable ancient craters. The whole of this vast space was once full of populous towns. Now it is given over to herdsmen and shepherds, and even by them is shunned and dreaded half the year on account of malaria."

"That is the fever one hears so much of," said Gretchen. "They told us at Venice that it was too late for Rome. We should be sure to get the fever."

Adrian Lyle laughed.

"That is a regular hotel trick," he said. "They never like to 'speed a parting guest.' There is always something to warn you of, or frighten you about."

"What hotel are you going to?" inquired Gretchen presently, "or will you come to ours?"

"Yours?" he said, and his gray eyes met her frank gaze with a sudden vivid flash. "Where do you go then!"

"Hotel Europa, in the Piazza di Spagna," she answered. "Neale says they will be sure to speak English or German there. He doesn't know any Italian. You may just as well come too," she went on persuasively. "If we do our sight-seeing together, you will be close at hand when wanted."

"But perhaps," he said quietly, "you would rather do your sight-seeing with your husband. Three are no company, the proverb says."

"But you make such a good third," she said innocently, "and you tell me everything so clearly and distinctly. Now Neale has always to read it off the guide-book."

"Ah!" said the young clergyman a little bitterly, "every man has his use. I am glad to find mine. I have often wondered whether indeed I had any."

"You?" exclaimed Gretchen, and looked at him with such a world of admiration and amazement, as almost startled him. "Now, Mr. Lyle, why do you speak like that? It cannot be that you mean it. Have you not told me of the great and glorious mission of your Church and Order—that this world is only the threshold of your office. Ah!" she went on hurriedly, "if I had learnt religion as you teach it—if I had known its beauty as you know it, I might—I might——"

"You might—what?" he asked eagerly, as he saw her lips pale, even while they checked the eager speech which seemed to threaten some dangerous revelation.

"Why should I not tell you?" she went on hurriedly. "You know I am of another faith to yours, but your God is also mine. It had been agreed that I should devote my life only to that service. I was to know nothing of the world. Indeed, I did know nothing. Ever before my eyes was held that mystic and exalted divinity, to whom my soul had been led —my youth, and all its coming years, consecrated. Freedom—joy—love; these were things I only knew by some instinct of sympathy—they never came into my life in this time of which we speak."

"And then?" asked Adrian Lyle, almost harshly.

"Then," she said, and a beautiful light and glow came over her face, and her eyes turned to the sleeper by her side, "then I met—him. After that it was one long rebellion against this decree. I could not give myself to Heaven as I had been told I must give myself. I could not shut my soul into the cold silence of a living grave. I longed for freedom, for happiness, for what was due to my youth. I prayed, I entreated, I wept. I asked Heaven for release, but Heaven did not heed; and then—then, in utter desperation, I broke my bonds, and cast aside my fetters, for love gave me strength, and led me to him. Oh, Mr. Lyle," she went on passionately, "often I have wondered if I did wrong; if being bound to Heaven's service, I should have sacrificed all earthly joys and affection at its shrine—but nature was too strong for me. I had been passive, I had been content; but then I had not known what it was to love. For love's sake I broke the chain that was to bind me to Heaven. Will Heaven ever forgive me, do you think?"

Looking at the clasped hands, the passionate eyes, the sweet, trembling lips, it seemed to Adrian Lyle as if even Heaven could scarcely be harsh to so lovely a sinner; but he did not say so.

His face had grown grave, almost stern:

"Had you entered the convent?" he asked abruptly.

"No; but they were to send me there the next day. And then I knew I could never, never escape, and the Sister who was to have charge of me was a stern and cruel woman, and I feared her. And Neale prayed me to come to him, and Lisschen said she would help me—but that, aunt and grandfather must never know; and I promised her—and at dead of night I stole away, and——"

"Hush!" cried Adrian Lyle roughly, almost rudely, "don't tell me any more. I—I can guess the rest," he went on abruptly: "it doesn't need words. You must have been in desperate case, poor child! I can't find it in my heart to blame you, but Heaven grant you may never regret the exchange you have made!"

"Have I been very wrong?" she asked humbly. "Do you think I shall ever be forgiven?"

Again that old cruel doubt gnawed at the heart-strings of Adrian Lyle; again something seemed to urge him to ask the one question that should confute that doubt, or—ay, that was the rub!—substantiate it. The dread, the fear, the daily growing certainty—these might be set at rest; but at what a cost! He turned his eyes from the pleading face to the arid plain before him.

"Right—wrong—what are they at best but quibbles of men's minds?" he muttered impatiently. "The law of Nature tells us that what is right is to our advantage, and that what is wrong entails adequate punishment. I can't say I think you were—wrong—but then, in appealing to me, you appeal to the doctrines of a faith widely different from your own. We have no monasteries and convents for the devotees of our religion—save some self-founded institutions or retreats for the ultra-zealous, or the ascetic Ritualist. To me, it has always seemed that it is an insult to the Creator, to shut away the life he has given, in the solitude of a cell, in the unutterable dreariness and loneliness of so-called religious penance. No—I say again, if your heart and soul rebelled against the tyranny of your Church, it was better to shun religious martyrdom. Of course," and his bright eyes looked smilingly at her, "of course it stands to reason that I have little sympathy with these doctrines of ascetics. If any one gives you a handsome or valuable gift and you deliberately destroy that gift before his eyes, do you suppose he would be pleased or gratified by such a reception? Well—life is a precious possession—it is meant to be used, not abused; to shed joy, comfort, and beauty around its individual sphere, not be offered as a sacrifice on some shrine of false humility or perverted belief."

"Oh," she cried eagerly, "how beautifully you express it! how happy you make me!"

The look and words touched Adrian Lyle deeply. Their eager and passionate vitality fell across the too vivid consciousness of his own feelings, as sunshine

and shadow fall over a landscape. But they cast his thoughts into a momentary whirl of passionate confusion, that set his nature into one fierce conflict of pain, and sorrow, and desire; yet having so set them, they were locked back by his iron will into those strong and secret chambers of his heart, from whence issued all the enemies with which he wrestled in his hours of solitude, in his nights of prayer.

Suddenly he withdrew his gaze; his face grew chill, as if a mask of stone had covered the mobile features.

"Do not thank me," he said coldly. "I am but a man, and perhaps a man less clear of judgment or intelligence than those of your priesthood from whom you learnt the duties of Christianity. They told you one thing; I tell you another. Creeds, doctrines, dogmas, faiths—the world is full of them. And what have they done for it, save plunge it into rivers of blood? Do you know"—and a little bitter laugh escaped his lips—"I once heard a poor uneducated man say, 'Men have a many creeds to teach, but God has only one Heaven.' There is philosophy for you."

"Are you two at your creeds and doctrines again?" murmured Kenyon, yawning and stretching himself lazily. "Do shut up, there's good people. Surely we're at the end of that confounded Campagna by this time! Why, we're due at Rome at four."

"It is a quarter to four," said Adrian Lyle, looking at his watch. "You've slept for nearly two hours, Kenyon."

"It will rest my eyes for the Pincio," said the young fellow, unfastening his bandage, and turning those weak but very loving orbs to Gretchen. "Why, child, how grave you look! Has Mr. Lyle been reading you a sermon? If you will persuade her to have nothing more to do with priests, Lyle, I shall be thankful, especially now. Heaven knows what domestic secrets they won't worm out of her, or what insubordination they won't counsel!"

"Indeed," said Gretchen eagerly, as she looked with all her heart's adoration at the young, handsome,

laughing face. "Indeed, Neale, it shall be to me as you wish. I will forswear even my faith for you."

"Mr. Lyle, I congratulate you on your convert," said Neale Kenyon, looking a little embarrassed at the serious turn of the conversation. "Certainly, though, she has nothing to thank her priests for, she would have been shut up hard and fast in a convent by this time had she listened to them; and now——"

"Now," said Adrian Lyle coldly and gravely, "she will only listen to you. Take care what you teach her, Kenyon. The soil is fruitful and innocent enough, but the seed to be planted there—that is a different matter."

"Ah, here comes Bari!" exclaimed Kenyon, joyfully. "That means Rome at last. A truce to sermons, my dear fellow. We'll go up to the Pincio as soon as we've washed off the dust of travel, and watch the sun setting over St. Peter's. That's better than any sermon. Let's hope we shall have the place to ourselves too. Most of the swells leave after Easter. Bari, you telegraphed for rooms, I suppose?"

"Yes, Monsieur," answered the discreet valet.

"Mr. Lyle is coming to the Europa also," said Gretchen, eagerly.

"That's all right," answered Kenyon. "It will save hunting him up whenever we want his company."

Bari had given a quick glance at the young clergyman.

"But they are fools, these English husbands," so ran his thoughts. "Does he think that no eyes but his own will tell Madame she is beautiful, or that a cassock does not warm beneath the beat of the human heart it veils? Ah, there is no love lost between Monsieur le prêtre and me! I know that well enough; but let him look to himself! my eyes are the sharpest, my ears the longest. Let Monsieur le prêtre look to himself!"

An hour later and the three travellers were driving up the winding slope towards the "Hill of Gardens," in Rome. Crowds of people were wending their way from the square below, with its great sphinxes, and

fountains, and drooping trees; others were climbing the steep stair-way that led to the terrace. A band was playing amongst the trees; bells were chiming in discordant rhythm; the soft spring air was alive with many voices chattering, and laughing, and screaming in the voluble and excitable fashion of Italians. Above all, the sky glowed warm, and rosy, and beautiful, as the sun's last rays lingered over the broken line of the hills, and lit with flame the great cross that crowns the dome of St. Peter's.

At the summit of the hill they left the carriage, and walked over the terrace and past the cactus and aloe trees, and the gay little kiosques, and on till they reached the stone balustrade where the idlers had gathered to chatter, and laugh, and gossip over a scene that was no longer new, on ground that had ceased to be sacred. But it was both new and sacred to Adrian Lyle. He stood motionless as a statue; his eyes swept, with one rapid wondering glance, over the magnificent panorama. The huge pile of St. Peter's and the Vatican; the great hills dark with cypress trees; the yellow waters of the Tiber; the round castle of St. Angelo, with the sun-rays glittering on its bronze angel; the pine groves of the Villa Doria; the whole vast labyrinth of roofs, spires, cupolas, towers and gardens, ruins and palaces, plains and marshes—all, in fact, that is Rome—stretched vast and silent before him, and struck him dumb for very wonder and very awe.

He forgot all else; he even forgot his companions. For the time being he was absorbed in that contemplation which seemed to fill his mind with a weight of ponderous memories, and turn all things of life, all hopes of past and future, into the visionary fragments of a dream.

"They are right to call it sacred ground," he thought reverently, his eyes turning to where the red and rayless sun burned above the dome raised to Nero's restless soul—"sacred indeed is it, and haunted by the greatest deeds of men, the grandest gifts of Heaven. They lie who call Rome dreary and commonplace. Commonplace!—while yet the bronze Aurelius stands upon the Capitoline Hill, and the Arch of

Constantine broods in glorious isolation beside the Rostra of Cæsar. Commonplace! the Mother of the World, where men's deeds live in a thousand memorials of greatness, and the very shadows of decay have a beauty that exceeds all modern art! Commonplace——"

"My dear Lyle," broke in Kenyon's voice at this moment, "hasn't your brown study lasted long enough? I asked you if you didn't feel how chilly the air gets the moment the sun goes down."

Adrian Lyle started as if he had been wakened from sleep. It was quite true; the sun had sunk below the horizon; the shadows had grown long; the terrace was almost deserted; and a faint chill wind swept over the hill and stirred the drooping boughs.

He looked at Gretchen. Her face was very pale. Her eyes, dark and absorbed, rested on that far-off purple line of the Alban Mountains, where so lately all the rose and gold of the flaming sky had spread its glory.

"And this is—Rome!" she said with a deep sigh, and then turned, as if for sympathy, to the figure beside her.

Her eyes met those of Adrian Lyle. Kenyon had strolled on, a little impatient at the absorption and silence of his companions.

She looked after him—her lips trembled a little. "He does not care," she said sorrowfully. "But then it is not new to him as it is to me. I feel as if—as if——"

"I know," said Adrian Lyle, quietly. "You forget it is also new to me."

"One cannot speak of what it is—you feel as I do, do you not?"

"Yes," he answered in the same dreamy, quiet way. "But do not speak of it. There are some feelings one cannot put into words."

Again she looked at him—long, earnestly as a child might look. Then suddenly her eyes drooped; a little shiver shook her frame. "Let us go," she said hurriedly. "Neale was right. It is very cold when once the sun has set."

## CHAPTER VII.

### "THE GODS OF OLD."

"You two must go to the Pantheon alone. My eyes are troublesome again. Besides, I have some letters to dictate to Bari. I can't put them off any longer."

It was Neale Kenyon who spoke; lounging, as was his wont, on one of the low, velvet seats in the reading-room of the Europa. Adrian Lyle had just entered. He had breakfasted early and been to the Church of the Jesuits, and now looked in to learn the arrangements of the day.

Gretchen was drawing on her gloves. Her bright face was a little clouded.

"You are getting very lazy, Neale," she said, in her quaint English. "But if we let you off this morning, you must come to the Borghese Villa this afternoon."

"Agreed," laughed Kenyon. "What an indefatigable sight-seer you are, my child! Now be off and grope about your favourite old mouldy streets. There are plenty round about the Pantheon. I think I walked round and round it some half-dozen times once, without finding it."

Another moment and Adrian Lyle was walking down the Corso with his fair young charge.

Girls in the picturesque dress of the Campagna were at every corner with their flower-baskets; the long street was gay and full of people; the shops glittered in the sunlight; a company of "bersaglieri" with streaming plumes were marching by; drums were beating, flags flying, beggars whining, priests in strange garbs, and monks of many Orders flitting along over the rough paving-stones, or lounging beside the church doors, or chattering in groups at the corners; and, amidst all, the inevitable tramcars were passing and repassing on their way to the Piazza di Venezia,

"How gay and bright it all is!" exclaimed Gretchen involuntarily. "Nothing old or mouldy here, is there, Mr. Lyle?"

"No," he answered. "What a picture of life and colour some of these Roman streets are! No wonder artists rave about them; the confused and heterogeneous mass of hues—costumes, faces, garbs! Where would one see the like again? Have you noticed yet what an infinitude of religious Orders there seems to be, judging from their dress? I have quite given up trying to count them."

"Italy seems a land made up of religion," said Gretchen.

"Or, rather, an incessant representation of religion," answered Adrian Lyle, quickly. "The corrupt and bigoted deification of superstition—not faith. Think of these poor, ignorant, groping souls seeking for spiritual good, and receiving only a multitude of prayers, and penances, and penalties, and external forms! Think of spirits trying to soar above the doctrines of priestcraft, and hampered with the dead weight of earthly intervention and direction! As well bid the material eye look through a painted window for the glory of celestial sunlight as lead the soul to shrines, and saints, and symbols, for its glimpses of Heaven. Would to God that one could make them hear or believe that there is but one dome of truth, and that neither priestly voice nor carnal dictates can bar the way thither! I often think that men would do better if, instead of preaching to savages and pagans, they would raise their voices against the mass of superstition and false creeds which have desecrated the simple purity of Christianity."

"And yet," said Gretchen timidly, "the Catholic religion has a great fascination. It promises help in our helplessness, aid in our need, direction in our doubts."

"It is an engine that has been worked by the most skilful of brains, into which an exhaustless patience has been thrown as motive power—an engine that should be fitted and adapted, as you say, to suit the needs and desires of most hearts. Yet it has

failed to do so. The fault lies, not with the machinery, but with those who work it."

He stopped for a moment to buy some roses from a little dark-eyed Italian boy, who had been following them perseveringly down the street.

"Will you have them?" he asked his companion shyly.

It was something altogether new to him to offer these little attentions to a woman.

"Thank you," said Gretchen eagerly. "How lovely they are! To think of having roses so early in the year!"

She fastened them in her dress, all save one little bud, which she handed to him:

"You must at least share your gifts," she said; "I feel as if I had robbed you."

He took it from her hand, and placed it in the button-hole of his coat.

"I fear I look even more unclerical than my wont," he said. "But I have an excuse now. We must dip into something more unfragrant and dreary in the way of streets. This is a short cut to the Piazza della Rotonda, and that is our destination. Have I told you that the Pantheon is the only really ancient edifice in Rome in perfect preservation? The decorations have, of course, been replaced, but the building itself has remained intact."

"And is it very, very old?"

"It dates from twenty-seven years before Christ. It was a Pagan temple once, and you will see the very niches that used to contain the statues of the heathen deities."

"Ah! Rome is wonderful," she said below her breath; and then they walked on in silence through the cross lane which led them to Lunghio's Fountain, and across the busy Piazza, on the south side of which stands that great stately circle the like of which the world does not hold. Its beauty has decayed; its coffered ceiling has been robbed; its marbles and porticoes are discoloured; it bears on every side the marks of those rough and warring ages that have desecrated its sacred glories; but it stands calm and

immoveable amidst the signs of time, with the eye of Heaven looking through its open dome like a silent witness of men's worship, and men's follies.

"How much one has heard of that open dome!" said Adrian Lyle, as he stood beside Gretchen, and looked up at the blue sky, forming its own roof to this strange temple. "It is a beautiful idea—is it not? To kneel here and see the eye of Heaven bent upon your worship; to watch the rain-clouds drop their tearful tribute, and the fleecy vapours sweep across that space of blue, like white doves' wings, that carry prayers to Heaven—truly this is a place where one might worship without thought of man's ministrations. Perhaps the ancients were wiser than we! Think of them labouring, dreaming, training, worshipping under the pure heavens, in the pure air, and then look at us—their followers—the outcome of a modern civilisation!"

"Only," said Gretchen softly, as his eyes turned to the niches once sacred to Venus and Mars, to Apollo, to the sacred Huntress of the Woods, or later, to the great Cæsar himself; "only theirs was a false worship, so you said."

"Perhaps not more false than many a one the world still owns," he answered bitterly. "We call our gods by other names, but we lay our hearts at their feet just the same. We are very weak, and very untrustworthy creatures, even at our best."

"I should not think you were weak," said Gretchen simply, as she turned her eyes to his face —a face with grand lines, and lustrous eyes, and lit by noble and unselfish purpose: a face to be remembered long, long after the mere colouring or outline of a far handsomer one had faded from her memory.

"I!——" he started and coloured. "Indeed you mistake: I am weak, very weak. Do not fall into the common error of supposing that my profession puts me beyond the pale of ordinary humanity. It does nothing of the sort. The priesthood may elevate the soul, but the grosser clothing of the body weights it just as heavily as if no such priesthood

existed. Try as we may, the best of us cannot get rid of the trammels of the body, until age or death has chilled the blood and set the throbbing pulses at rest for evermore."

He turned and moved slowly on towards the high altar. Tapers were burning there in the solemn gloom; the faint odour of incense still floated, mist-like, above the golden cross; around, in a mighty circle, lay the tombs of the mighty dead. Gretchen followed; but as her eyes caught the sacred symbol, the force of habit, or some stronger feeling, overcame her; she sank down on her knees and bowed her head in reverent silence. Adrian Lyle watched her. So young, so fair, so child-like—fit emblem indeed of that holy womanhood shrined in Raphael's heart, and sacred to his genius, here, where his memory is immortalised and his mighty spirit laid to rest!

She rose at last and turned to him; her eyes humid and her cheeks flushed, her lips tremulous with emotion.

"I am so happy," she said; "and when one is happy it is surely right to give thanks for it every hour one lives, for, otherwise indeed, Heaven might deem us ungrateful."

"You are right," said Adrian Lyle, almost humbly. "But few, indeed, know how to receive happiness in your spirit. We take it as our right, even as we resent sorrow as an injustice. The Heaven who deals both may well call us thankless."

"You see," she went on as she walked by his side to where those two brief lines form the noblest epitaph to the noblest genius Fame has ever crowned —"when one has had sunshine all one's life one scarcely heeds it; but when the sunshine breaks suddenly over a long, long gloom, how one loves it, and wonders at it, and prizes it. That is how I feel since I have been so happy."

"You were not happy, then," he said hesitatingly, "before—before you met Kenyon?"

"Oh, no," and a look almost of terror came into the clear, deep eyes. "No one loved me, no one

wanted me. I was always lonely, and often very, very sad."

"Then why did they wish to prevent your marriage?" he asked suddenly.

"They did not like the English," she answered, "and Neale is English; and then, as I told you before, they had promised me to the Convent."

"And you ran away," said Adrian Lyle, mechanically.

He was threading the mazes of the old doubt, here in this strange sanctuary, before those sacred and sainted shrines, as he had done before on the blue waters of Venice, and amidst the dusky streets of Rome.

"Yes," she answered; "I ran away."

"Where were you married?" he asked, pausing suddenly and looking straight at the sweet child-face and candid eyes; but his lips paled and his hand trembled as he asked.

Her face neither paled nor flushed beneath that sudden, sharp scrutiny.

"We went to Vienna," she said simply. "We were married there by a priest."

"In a church?" asked Adrian Lyle.

"No; in a room."

"But Kenyon is not of your country or religion," he cried stormily; then paused as he saw the wonder in her face.

"What does that matter?" she said. "Love, such love as ours—that is a real marriage, so Neale always says, more sure and sacred than a thousand laws could make it."

"My innocent child"—it was almost a groan that escaped Adrian Lyle's lips, seeing how that one doubt had sprung into a hydra-headed monster, with fangs that fastened close and sharp upon his very heart. He could not wake her from her trance of peace and happiness; he could not thrust the cruelty of shame and worldly reasoning into this pure paradise of dreams; he could not say to her—"your marriage is a mockery, and your lover knows it." No, not one or any of those things could he do, and yet he knew

that somewhere, close at hand, lay a duty sharp and terrible; a duty that laid claim to his honour as a man, his function as a priest. He had solved his doubt; he had set it at rest, for the certainty of—what? Such pain, such horror, such suffering, as never yet had touched his life, save in the impersonal shadow of others' woes—woes that had laid claim to his ministry, his patience, his compassion, but never to his own actual participation.

The steady inner light of the man's own lofty standard of morality burned clear and bright before him now. For him there were but two paths to follow—the right or the wrong; two paths which he had ever set before the erring and the weak; and these two faced him now with their signal-posts of doom on the one hand, of suffering and sorrow on the other. Could he bid these young feet stray on towards the frowning precipice, heedless and blind? Or could he stay them with sharp and sudden warning that should hurl all joy and peace of life aside, and show what lay beyond the brightness and beauty of the flower-strewn path?

He turned aside—he moved away with hurried steps to where that calm pure eye of Heaven looked down through the open roof. It was veiled and darkened now. Thick banks of cloud had gathered overhead, the sharp patter of rain-drops fell upon the dome, and some touched his face like tears that consecrated the baptism of sorrow.

At that instant, timidly as a child might have crept, she crept to his side; innocently as a child might have touched, she touched his hand. "Why have you gone away?" she said; "have I said anything to offend you?"

The look, the touch, the voice tried to the utmost his self-control—sweeping out of his mind the purer aspirations, the indefinite character of feelings, which his heart alone should have known. All that there was in him of manhood—manhood unaroused, untouched as yet by the rapture of a woman's presence—sprang to life as flame from fire, and he trembled like a leaf as his eyes sank before her own.

"Offended me?—no," he said almost roughly. "Only—only . " and he broke off abruptly. His rapid glance took in the solitude of the great temple. Not a creature was there but an old cripple, kneeling at one of the side altars—deaf and blind to all but her own devotions.

"Tell me, child," he said quickly, "you have said you are happy—happy in every hour you live. Can you imagine that there could be for you any joy in life that showed you a duty too stern and severe for happiness; that parted you from love; that was all renunciation and suffering and struggling, with but one reward at last—Heaven?"

"You speak as the priests used to speak," she said, looking up at him with an awed and paling face. "You preach, too, their doctrines of renunciation—self-sacrifice—joylessness—oh no, no, Mr. Lyle, I could not bear that. I could not, indeed. I am not good, I know; but oh, do let me be a little happy while I may! You cannot mean that I should give up what I have only just found. Oh! no, no. I have vowed myself—given myself—I cannot undo what is done. I cannot live if you tell me I must go back to the darkness and gloom—the loneliness and pain."

Her eyes dilated, her breath came quick and fast, she faced him there beneath the eye of Heaven, with the tears of Heaven falling on her brow. "What do you mean?" she said, and her voice shook. "You look so pale and stern; you frighten me."

The innocent words smote him like a blow. With a terrible effort he recovered himself:

"Frighten you? Heaven forgive me," he muttered, and passed his hand across his eyes as if to shut out some painful vision. "My child," and his voice grew sweet and tender like some strange strain of music to her ear, "go your way; be happy while you can. It is the greatest gift the gods bestowed on mortals; it is the greatest gift that our God holds as His, Heaven knows. I should be little better than a murderer to slay before you what your heart cherishes as its life—ay, dearer than its life. A

great love is pure, let the world say what it will. Only"—and his voice grew stern, and his eye flashed as it met the wonder and the fear of hers—"only, I feel as if I ought to give you one word of warning. Others have loved like you, trusted like you, yet have found love a false idol."

"And you think," she said slowly, "that I might find that also?"

"I hardly know what I think," he said bitterly, "save that life is not the garden of roses you imagine it and I have told you no one—no one—ever treads its paths without suffering or without pain."

"I can bear it," she said softly, "so long as he loves me. I can never be alone, and never unhappy, while I have him."

Adrian Lyle was silent, too deeply moved for speech. Yet a voice seemed to whisper in his ear: "You are shirking duty. How do you know that this soul may not be required at your hands; that for sake of a moment's pitiful weakness you may not be called to account in that dread Hereafter, of which you speak so confidently to others?"

And while the torment and the doubt still held him silent, a sudden little rift came in the darkened clouds; through the vaulted dome there sped a tiny shaft of sunlight, and touched the bright head and troubled, serious eyes of Gretchen.

He saw it, and she saw it, and their eyes met, and the gloom faded from his own.

"It is an omen," he said. "The sunshine has dispelled fear. Let us accept it."

He stretched out his hand, and she took it, and stood there looking up at his face trustfully as a child who seeks instruction.

"Will you always be my friend?" she said. "I feel so safe and strong when with you. But perhaps"—as she saw a slight change in his face—"I ought not to ask that. We must part. And how could I expect you to remember me?"

"I shall always do that," he said very gently—"always. And as for being your friend, if it depended on myself I should only too readily assent;

but your—husband—does not like me; and perhaps one day he will like me still less. I have that to say which must be said ere I can sleep in peace. No; do not look so disturbed. I will not quarrel, I promise you."

"I do not understand," she faltered, and the colour left her cheek in sudden fear.

"There is no need," said Adrian Lyle. "You have called me your friend. I will do you at least one service for honour of the name; and then——"

"Then?" she questioned, as her hands dropped from his unconscious hold.

"Then," he said, with an effort at gaiety, "we will go our separate ways on the journey of life, and I will wish you God-speed. But," he added solemnly, "if at any time—in any time of trouble, sorrow, need—you wish for me, or feel that my presence can in any way dispel a difficulty, clear a doubt, or soothe an hour of suffering, you need but speak a word and I will come to your side; and all that lies in man's power to do for a fellow mortal I will do for you."

"Thank you," she said, very low, but with an earnestness solemn as his own; "I will remember."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### "KEEP YOURSELF UNSPOTTED FROM THE WORLD."

"I WANT to speak to you," said Adrian Lyle to Kenyon that night. "There is no one in the smoking-room just now. Will you come there?"

Something in the gravity of the clergyman's face and tone struck the young man. He felt uncomfortable. He rose, however, and sauntered lazily through the vestibule and passages to the room indicated.

The two young men lit their cigars, and seated themselves on one of the many lounges scattered about. The deep-seated gravity in Adrian Lyle's eyes met the

curious and somewhat uncomfortable gaze of Neale Kenyon's. It was the latter who broke silence.

"What is the important matter?" he asked.

"Kenyon," said the young clergyman, with that straightforward simplicity which was his notable characteristic, "you must not think I am intrusive, or that I presume upon the cordiality of our chance acquaintanceship, if I put to you a question that has been troubling me not a little. Is your marriage quite —straightforward?"

All the colour faded out of Kenyon's face, but his eyes flashed wrathfully.

"Your question," he said insolently, "is a strange one, though men of your cloth are proverbial for meddling. May I ask why you should think there was anything wrong about it?"

"Yes," answered Adrian Lyle. "From something your wife let fall, I learned her position and circumstances. She is young, innocent, trusting. That, of course, is no news to you. Her loneliness, and the absence of all other friends or relatives, embolden me to put this question. If you assure me it is all right and satisfactory, I will believe you. Kenyon, for Heaven's sake don't prevaricate. That she loves you with all her heart and soul is plain to see. Tell me is she really—your wife?"

Neale Kenyon took the cigar from his lips, and flicked off the gray ash carelessly.

"You are a—clergyman," he said. "I know interference is part of your office. Pray do you put these questions to all the couples you chance to meet on their honeymoon?"

"I think," Adrian Lyle said quietly, "that it would be better to answer my question in the spirit I put it, than try to pick a quarrel with me for what is only a pardonable interest in your young wife. She is such a child!"

"A child with whose innocent confidence you have been tampering!" burst out Kenyon in sudden anger. "You are not the first of your cloth who has deemed it a duty to weaken the love, or destroy the confidence that should exist between husband and wife!"

"I think," said Adrian Lyle with dignity, "that if, instead of abusing me or my profession vaguely, you would give me the simple assurance I ask for, it would be better for all parties. It is not so unnatural for one gentleman to seek from another the security of a woman's honour, that you should resent my doing so."

"A woman's honour," said Kenyon, replacing his cigar, "is her husband's consideration."

"Then I am to consider my question answered," said Adrian Lyle eagerly; "and I will beg your pardon for my doubts. It only seemed to me that as her religion is not yours, some legal formalities might have been neglected. If"—and he coloured and hesitated—"if you would like me to read the ceremony of your own Church——"

Neale Kenyon laughed harshly. "My good sir," he said, "I really have none. All creeds, doctrines, and denominations are pretty much the same to me. I give you candour for candour, you see."

Adrian Lyle rose to his feet. "A woman," he said sternly, "is always generous where she loves. Experience has not taught me that the case holds good with men. The greater the trust, the deeper is often the deception."

"Your experience," sneered Kenyon, "seems to have been singularly unfortunate—even for a clergyman."

"You might do me the justice," said Adrian Lyle, "to meet me on equal ground as one man of honour meets another. Had any one—not of my order—put the question to you that I have put——"

"I should have kicked him out of the room!" interrupted Kenyon, springing to his feet, and speaking with a passion that the occasion scarcely seemed to warrant. "That is how I should have answered an impertinence as unwarrantable as yours!"

Adrian Lyle looked at the flushed, handsome young face, with pained, proud eyes.

"Perhaps you are right to resent my question," he said, in a low, but still calm voice. "In your place I might have done the same. No one but a brute or a villain could have had the heart to deceive an inno-

cent, trusting child like—like your wife. But"—and he lifted his head, and shook back the dark hair from his brow—"your anger is a welcome relief to my doubts. I feel I have done my duty. If, as you seem to think, I have overstepped the bounds of courtesy or prudence, I can only repeat—I ask your pardon. You might easily grant it," he added, with that winning smile which lent his face so rare a charm, "for after to-night it is extremely improbable that we shall meet again. I leave Rome to-morrow morning. Therefore," and he frankly extended his hand, "say you forgive me, Kenyon, if only for the sake of the pleasant days and hours we have spent together."

He had tossed aside the cigar which he had scarcely smoked, and, in fact, had taken up more as an excuse to be companionable. The light fell on his face, and its nobility and power seemed to stand out in grand relief against the sullenness and gloom of Kenyon's. The latter, half-reluctantly, touched the outstretched hand.

"I—I bear you no ill-will," he said. "I dare say it did seem a little strange; and Gretchen could not have enlightened you much. But I give you my word of honour, she is my wife, and the world shall know her as such. Will that content you?"

"Perfectly," said Adrian Lyle cordially, and with a glad belief in the acknowledgment he had scarcely hoped to win. "And now you will excuse me if I leave you. There are some necessary arrangements to make, and I have a long journey before me to-morrow."

"It is a pity to leave Rome so soon, is it not?" said Kenyon. "You have scarcely seen anything of it."

"I think," answered Adrian Lyle, with that quiet smile which seemed to mean so much, "that it is better for me to go before I see—more."

"Of course you are the best judge," Kenyon said indifferently.

He was angry with his own anger; nor would he confess, even to himself, that it was a relief to think of Adrian Lyle's absence.

"I must be more careful in future," he said to himself. "There shall be no more picking up chance acquaintances; they are apt to turn out troublesome. However, I have got out of this very well."

The sound of the closing door fell upon his inward reflections, and roused him. He was alone—alone and at the mercy of such conscience as he still possessed.

A sudden paroxysm of fear seized him.

"I hope," he said, "that he believes; that he won't make inquiries. Pshaw! Why should I fear, even if he did? Nothing would induce her to leave me. Nothing would induce me to leave her. The absence of some paltry formalities can't weaken a man's honour or his love; and she is safe with me."

Safe with him! How many a man has said those same words in similar case! How many a man has been led to forswear them when the trance of passion is over—when the glamour of love is past!

It was not of this that Kenyon thought now. To him, at this time, Gretchen was as purely and surely his wife, as though a dozen bishops had consecrated their union, and all the laws of the land had sealed their marriage ritual. At this time; but he had not yet asked himself, how long would it last? "I should never fail her; I never could," Kenyon muttered, as he paced to and fro the deserted room. "On the whole, though, I am glad that fellow has gone. He had a knack of making one uncomfortable, and he would have ended by putting fancies into Gretchen's head. For the future, it is best she should have only me!"

The hotel omnibus stood before the door early the next morning, and Adrian Lyle had just tossed his travelling-bag into the interior. He left his heavy luggage behind, for he had resolved to penetrate into those wild mountainous districts which form the boundary between the Papal States and the kingdom of Naples.

Adrian Lyle was at present possessed with an intense, overmastering desire for solitude. He wanted

to get away from even civilisation and comfort, to—so to speak—have out with himself these inward conflicts and inclinations; these weak yieldings to temptation; this forgetfulness of the aims and objects of that high mission with which he was entrusted—before he should again take up the burden of his life's duties, and labour in the toil and heat of the world's great vineyard.

It was so early that he had no fear of seeing the Kenyons. He had no wish to do so. Yet, as he stood there, with the morning sunlight shining over the broad piazza, and the cool, fresh air fanning his brow, a light hand touched his arm, a voice, whose music sent a strange thrill to his heart, murmured: "Where do you go so early, Mr. Lyle?"

It was Gretchen.

For a second or two he stood quite still, unable to frame a word. Then with an effort, he spoke:

"Did not your husband tell you? I am going to do a little mountaineering. I want to get out of the pale of civilisation for awhile. That Sabine range has been tempting me ever since I first beheld it."

"And where do you go first?"

"To Velletri," he said. "Then I intend to walk on to Segni."

"And—when do you come back?" she asked timidly.

"I am not quite sure," he said, with a strange hesitation. "Perhaps I may not see you again."

"Oh, that is hard," she cried, with so true a ring of regret in her voice that it smote him to the heart. "I had so much to say—so much to ask," she went on hurriedly. "And you know you promised to help me. Oh, I feel so ignorant, so helpless—and—and I dare not even go to any of the priests for counsel, for Neale does not wish it."

There was such appeal in her face, such yearning in her eyes, that for a moment all the man's self-command was shaken. For a moment his conscience seemed to rebuke him with cowardice. Suppose a day should come when this struggling soul might be required at his hands—when, in answer to question or

demand, he could but say: "I was like the Levite of old, I passed by on the other side!"

The struggle was sharp but short. He turned from the clinging hands, the beseeching eyes.

"My child," he said, "you have your husband. Take to him your doubts, your fears, your sorrows. I —even if I would—must not interfere between you, unless he expressly desires it."

"But," she said timidly, "you do not understand. Neale will not speak with me of—of the things you did. He says he has no creed at all; that I may keep to my own, or any other, it does not matter."

"And are you not happy," he asked—"happy enough to trust and believe in the doctrines and tenets of your own Church? If accident had not thrown me in your way—what then?"

"I suppose I should have been content, then," she said almost regretfully. "But you see, Mr. Lyle, I did meet you, and you—made me think."

The blood seemed to ebb away from Adrian Lyle's face, leaving it cold and colourless as marble. "I am sorry," he said abruptly, almost as it were against his will.

"And I think I am sorry, too," said Gretchen with a sigh. "For I can't forget—and I can't go back to what I was, and I have no one to explain or to teach, since I must not go to the priests. But," and her face brightened, "perhaps we shall meet again after all. You may return from the mountains even before I leave Rome; and meanwhile I will think over all you have told me, and try to understand your religion, for it seems a very beautiful one——"

"Perhaps," Adrian Lyle interposed hurriedly, "we may meet again. If you need me, I think we will. Meanwhile, do not vex your mind with doubts and fears. Religion—the purest and highest form of religion—is a very simple thing, believe me. It can be summed up in few words. 'Do good to others, and—keep yourself unspotted from the world.' That sounds hard, perhaps, to those who know what the world is; but it is possible, even without the barricade of convent walls and bodily martyrdom."

"I will remember," she said gladly. "Ah, I see you must go now. Indeed, I am very sorry. Do—do say you will try and see us again."

"I will," he said very low, but very earnestly, "if your husband desires it."

Then he turned away, and left her standing there in the early sunlight, with softly troubled eyes, and so strange a regret on her eloquent young face that it needed no words to convince him how sincere her sorrow was.

"After all," he muttered to himself, as the vehicle jolted and rolled over the uneven Roman streets, "after all, what a coward I am! It is not for her sake I am leaving—only for my own."

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## CHAPTER IX.

### THE POISON OF DOUBT.

When Bari came to his master for his orders for the day, Neale Kenyon noticed that he loitered about the room as if he wished to say something more than he had already done.

"Is anything the matter?" the young Englishman asked uneasily. "No one arrived here that I know—eh, Bari?"

"No, Monsieur," answered the man readily. "I keep a look-out for that. But—but is Monsieur aware the English clergyman has left?"

"Yes," answered Kenyon sharply. "What of that?"

"Nothing, only Monsieur may perhaps congratulate himself on the fact. The gentleman was too curious, and—had too strong an admiration for Madame."

Kenyon wheeled round and faced him. "What makes you say so?"

"Oh, many things," answered the Italian. "I am

observant, as Monsieur knows, and I have not too great an admiration for gentlemen of the cloth, as Monsieur also knows. The clergyman is young, and handsome, and clever, and Madame has for him a great interest—so great that she came down to see him off, and procure his address."

Kenyon's brow grew dark. "Is that true?" he said hoarsely.

"Quite true," answered Bari. "They had a long conversation—religious, of course. Mr. Lyle has hopes of converting Madame. He assured her they would meet again."

"Did he?" said Kenyon scoffingly. "Perhaps he will find some one else has a voice in that little matter"

"I—I do not think it wise that Madame should ever have been permitted to be too confidential with him," said Bari. "Religion has for women so strange a charm, and the priest is so attractive in that he is the man and yet—the priest. Monsieur must remember that all the early life of Madame has been steeped in religious fervour—that it is a part of herself. If denied the consolations of her own Church, she seeks another. But something of that sort she must have; it is the fault of her education, her home, her surroundings. Even the good Lisschen was very devout," he added with a smile.

Kenyon's face grew darker and darker. "Her religion shall be—me," he was saying to himself. "The clergy understand the value of women; but I have no intention of permitting interference between Gretchen and myself. Adrian Lyle is a fine fellow, but he is a priest, and, like all his order, he puts forward the feelers of curiosity under the garb of spiritual interest."

Aloud he said: "I am quite aware of Mr. Lyle's plans, Bari, for he informed me of them last night. He will not come across our path again."

The man bowed, but a curious smile crossed his lips. "I am glad to hear it," he said quietly. "I do not think Mr. Lyle is a friend of Monsieur's."

Kenyon was doomed to be irritated for many days

by the constant mention of Adrian Lyle. Gretchen was full of regret at his departure, of fear that he might come to harm among the lawless "contrabandieri"; full too of lamentations respecting questions she had failed to put, or doubts she might have solved.

Bari had been right when he said that in the present state of her mind, she longed for the consolations of religion. She had been used to depend on priestly guidance and direction. She now found herself cut adrift from it entirely, and that too in scenes and places only too well calculated to awaken the memories of her carefully instilled faith. Every procession, every church open at all hours to all comers, every roadside shrine, every chime of bells, or chant of choristers, seemed a rebuke to her.

Even at this early stage she had learned that to speak of such feelings to Kenyon displeased him. That was one reason why she so missed Adrian Lyle. As long as their conversation ran in the safe grooves of Art, or spent itself in question and answer, or sought historical information, all was well; but, as day after day passed on, and they grew familiarised with Rome, Gretchen found that Kenyon had as little sympathy with her favourite Madonnas or Saints, as she could summon up for the broken and discoloured statues of Venus, or the torsos of Hercules, or the Etruscan bronzes and Pompeian relics about which he raved.

"I have had enough of the Old Masters," he said laughingly one day. "We have seen so many of their works. Doesn't it strike you that there is a marvellous lack of variety in their subjects? Priestcraft has been the ruin of Art. Fancy what these fellows might have done had they been left uninfluenced! But they had no wider scope of subject than the Madonna, or the Saints. I am sick of both. I believe that man stuck full of arrows is a humbug; and as for the others, with what Mark Twain rightly calls their individual 'trade marks,' I decline to see anything saintly about them. It is my belief that if a half or even a third of the people who visit Italy spoke out their honest opinions, they would say its Art is

simply an idealised antiquity. Why, perhaps our own modern paintings may acquire these same deep tones, and shades, and softness of colour, centuries hence. But the world has surely advanced enough to admit that the subject and treatment of a picture is more really Art than the fact of mixing colours. Fancy if we walked through a modern gallery, and found that every second or third picture was a repetition of one subject! How horribly monotonous! I am sure we must have seen some five hundred St. Sebastians, and double as many Madonnas, and some scores of Judiths and Susannas. Is it not so?"

"Yes," Gretchen confessed. "I think there are a great many similar subjects. But the great painters doubtless lived simple and devout lives, and did their best to please Heaven."

"I dare say they did their best to fill their pockets," answered Kenyon scoffingly. "Art may be a divinity to worship, but she must also be a divinity that pays."

Gretchen sighed.

They were standing by the Fountain of Trevi, and her eyes were watching the water as it dashed over the broken heap of massive rock which so well simulates Nature's handiwork.

"I do not think I understand Art at all," she said gently. "Only sometimes a Madonna's face will touch me, or the patience and sadness in some Christ's eyes draw tears to my own; but these are the pictures you dislike."

"I dislike what is superstitious and untrue," answered Kenyon. "I do not profess to know much about Art or artists. I think they are an incomprehensible race of beings myself. They claim something they call 'ideality.' It may be very grand, but I think it is also very uncomfortable. Look at sculpture, now! What is that but repetition? We laugh to scorn the traditions of gods and goddesses. We call Olympus and its deities a fable, but they alone are sacred to one special Art, and a man may take any specimen of nude womanhood or manhood, call it into the life of marble, christen it Venus or Psyche, Diana or Bacchus,

Hercules or Daphne, and straightway it becomes classic! Really, the more we think of life, the more assured we must become that it is one vast humbug!"

"Do not sweep away my faith in everything," said Gretchen, laughing, "unless you can give me something better. I can't have you growing 'cynical,' as Mr. Lyle used to say when you made these remarks. I wish he were here to argue with you," she went on regretfully. "I am not clever enough; I can only agree."

"That is much better," said Kenyon, drawing her hand into his arm and moving on across the sunlit square. "For, then, I feel satisfied with myself. Sympathy is a very comfortable thing."

"Is England at all like this?" she asked presently. "I seem to know so little about it, and you rarely speak of it."

A shade passed over the young man's handsome face. "It is not at all like this," he said. "The air is certainly not dream-haunted. And," with a short laugh, "I certainly can never remember feeling poetic or fervid there, as you have so frequently accused me of becoming. The hunting is very jolly," he added, relapsing into commonplace, "and life is very comfortable. You foreign nations don't seem to know what home life is."

"No?" queried Gretchen meekly. "Yet they say the English and the Germans are so much alike in that respect."

"Wait till you see John Bull as he is," laughed Kenyon. "Then tell me where the points of resemblance begin or end."

"Are we going there soon?" she asked.

"I—I suppose so," he answered. "This wandering life must come to an end, sweet as it is. I often wonder if you will like England," he added doubtfully.

"I shall like any place where you are," she answered, with love's sweet certainty of a future with which the joys of the present will be eternally blended.

"But," hesitated Kenyon, "I may not be able to be with you always. I mean as we are now. Life can't be a continuous honeymoon, sweetheart!"

"Of course not," she answered gravely. "I shall not expect to keep you by me every hour. I should not like to interfere with your duties. I have not forgotten that you are a soldier. You have been a long time away, have you not?"

"Yes," he said, "on account of my eyes. Thank goodness, they're all right now."

"Do you remember," she said, with that pretty shyness which still lent her love so great a charm, "do you remember how you deceived me at first about your sight? I felt so sorry. I thought you really were blind and alone, and so I went and spoke to you."

"For which fact I shall be ever grateful," interpolated Kenyon.

"But it was not quite fair of you, all the same," she said gravely,

"Don't tell me you are sorry for it, though," he said, laughing. "Really I could not help myself. Your unconscious soliloquy had interested me so much, and the opportunity was too tempting."

"Oh, I am not sorry—now," she answered readily, "and I am sure I never shall be; but how little I thought——"

"How little one ever thinks!" interrupted Kenyon, almost sharply. Innocent, unconscious words like these were like a sharp touch of pain, the recurrent stab of some remorse that probed his heart when he was off his guard.

"I suppose so," she said. "But, after all, what does it matter? Everything must have a beginning. Only it seems strange that what at the time we hardly notice, should become a matter of important result."

"You are becoming quite a philosopher," laughed Kenyon. "But I would rather you were the childish maiden of the woods who apostrophised cross old Lisschen."

"I wonder how she is now," said Gretchen suddenly. "How they all are," she added remorsefully. "Ah," and she looked at Kenyon with all that awakened soul in her deep, soft eyes, "I can never be

like I was then. When I look back on that day, I feel as if years must have passed over my head."

"Don't speak so solemnly, it is like a reproach to me," said Kenyon; "and," hurriedly and almost with passion, "reproach from you I could never bear—I, who have altered all your life."

"But made it such a happy one," she said tenderly.

And their eyes met under deep shadows of those mossy-haunted woods of beautiful Borghese, and amidst the tempered glory of leaf and sunlight, and the warm spring loveliness of the drowsy noon, they told again the old tale which still held for both its golden charm, which still was sweet to ear and heart as when its first murmurs broke the silence of the lonely woods of Dornbach.

# Book III.

## CHAPTER I.

### "MY LADY DISDAIN."

MEDEHURST ABBEY was a noble and beautiful place—the place of note in the county—and Sir Roy Kenyon, its present owner, was a universal favourite. He was a man of handsome presence and courtly manners, with nothing too great or too distinguished about him to dwarf lesser natures or make ordinary folk uncomfortable. Somewhat epicurean and easy-going in tastes and morals, he liked to take life as he found it, and get as much enjoyment as was compatible with a minimum of trouble. He had no special political principles; he went to church as a concession to respectability, not that he valued its creeds or doctrines, or, for the matter of that, believed in them. He had an unlimited adoration for his only daughter, whose will had been his law from the first moment she had acquired the power of asserting it, and recognised the advantages of so doing.

This daughter, Alexis, was somewhat unpopular among the maids and matrons who openly adored the eligible widower. Those clear, glowing eyes of hers had a knack of making other women feel uncomfortable, or "found out;" and her beauty was in every way so remarkable that they had to acknowledge themselves extinguished whenever she appeared.

To say Alexis Kenyon was "original" was to say very little, and yet she was too unlike all other women to be classified as they would be. Her mother

had been a Russian—a beautiful widow—whom Sir Roy had met in his wanderings, and married in a fit of idolatrous passion, from which he was destined to awake very speedily. He brought her to his English home, which she never liked, and introduced her to his English neighbours and friends, whom she cordially detested, and with whom she made herself extremely unpopular. The marriage was not a happy one, and Sir Roy's constant absences seemed to give grounds for what rumour had already whispered, that he tried to console himself abroad for the absence of the love and peace he assuredly never found at home. His wife had but this one child, to whom he was devotedly attached, and when at last freedom came, she was his constant companion. He took her everywhere. He had her educated in all places and by all sorts of teachers. The result of this system was that she grew up most decidedly "unfeminine," according to the ordinary acceptation of the term. She had a singularly acute and cultivated intellect; was a fearless rider, and indefatigable traveller; could swim, boat, fish, and play billiards as well as any man; and withal had a most delicate and graceful beauty that conveyed the idea of indolence and languor rather than dauntless courage and almost perfect health.

She could be "grande dame" to her finger-tips when so disposed, and again throw off listlessness and languor in a moment to become eager, fierce, impulsive, wilful, as the fancy of the hour decreed.

She had had lovers innumerable, but they bored more than they diverted her. At three-and-twenty she was heart-whole as a child, and, like a child, regardless of the sufferings caused by her caprices, or the follies committed for her sake. She had travelled a great deal, but though she professed to no weakness of regard for one country or one place more than another, she had a decided preference for her beautiful English home, and would often be seized with a whim to return to it, just as Sir Roy fancied he was irretrievably committed to a lengthened sojourn in some foreign land.

A whim of this description had brought them back to Medehurst towards the end of June, when every one imagined they were in America.

She had been crazy to go to America, and had travelled indefatigably through its wonderful cities and magnificent country; but suddenly she discovered that the people were odious, the climate intolerable, the habits and customs vulgar in the extreme, and declared she must go home: it had been idiotcy to come all this distance. Then there was nothing interesting or entertaining to be found; and Sir Roy, listening with his usual good-humoured indulgence, gave the order to return, and, much to his own surprise, found that for once his daughter's inclinations tallied exactly with his own.

They found London hot and crowded, and Alexis thereupon carried her father off to the Abbey, foregoing all the charms and allurements of the season by reason of a sudden caprice for the country. The caprice had lasted for several days. Towards sunset on one of these days she was sauntering, with a troop of dogs at her heels, through the woods that were the glory of the Abbey. Away to the right lay the ruins of the old cloisters, covered thick and close with ivy, where the owls and bats found resting-place. On the other side of the wood was the beautiful beech avenue that led from the lodge to the house, and the girl, as she skirted it, suddenly paused and looked with surprise at a figure advancing rapidly in her direction.

In a moment she had left the shade of the wood, and stood in full sight as the man advanced—a young man, fair and sun-tanned; with a tall, soldierly figure and bearing, that brought a smile of recognition to her lips.

She went towards him with something of surprise as well as of pleasure in her face:

"Neale!" she exclaimed, "what a surprise! Why did you not send word you were coming?"

The young man took her outstretched hand. He did not meet the frank gaze with equal frankness, and a momentary flush crossed his brow and cheek.

"I know," he said, "that you like surprises, and I thought you'd be here as—as town is so hot."

"It was detestable," she admitted. "I was glad to leave it. But how well you look! And your eyes——"

"Yes! they are all right. That German oculist is wonderful."

"You have been a long time away," she said pleasantly, and looking at him in a calm, critical fashion that somewhat discomposed him. "Were you at Vienna all the time?"

"No. I took advantage of my leave and went on to Rome. There was no use coming back. You and Sir Roy were at the Antipodes, as usual——"

"No, not quite so far, only in America. But shall we go on to the house?"

"If you wish. Is your father in? Have you any visitors?"

"Not at present. I believe some people are coming next week—no one you know; and, to answer your first question last, my father is in. I left him in the library going over the steward's accounts."

They turned and moved slowly up the avenue, under the shade of the beautiful leafage.

"You have not said you are glad to see me," remarked the young man presently, as he glanced down at the pale, clear-cut face by his side.

"I am never glad to see any one—except my father," she answered tranquilly; "and I never tell polite fibs for the sake of politeness. No one can say I am not sincere."

"Sincerity," said her cousin, "is not always agreeable."

"Oh, that is the fault of people who can't bear a little plain speaking."

"Your speaking," he said, laughing, "is generally plain enough. You don't leave a loophole for imagination. How much mischief have you done in these past months?"

"What do you call mischief?" she said. "That is rather your province as a man, when your hands are idle and your days unemployed."

He flushed hotly.

"If it is a man's province, it is a woman's faculty," he said.

"Well, we try to resist; you don't. There's the difference. Why, you look quite guilty. Is it a case of the 'arrow shot at a venture'?"

"Tormenting, as usual," he said, with lightness; but it was forced lightness, and her keen ear detected the false ring in his tones.

"I think," she said gravely, "you must allow I have always been merciful to you. I have looked upon you as a sort of elder brother all my life. Come, be frank. Have you met with any adventures since we last met? Your letters were always most unsatisfactory."

"I was never a good hand at writing," he said, with an effort to appear composed, as he met the merciless raillery of her clear, laughing eyes.

"No; a very stupid hand; but that is begging the question. You know I dislike evasions. I shall really begin to think you have something to conceal."

"You would be wrong then," he said hotly, almost angrily. "But my concerns have never appeared to interest you before, and I fail to see why they should do so now."

"Do you?" she said, with a little cold laugh. "It is somewhat inexplicable. Men are like children—they are easily spoilt. Once listen to a child, and he will bore you about himself for ever. Appear interested in a man, and there will be no end to his claims on your patience and forbearance. It is best to nip both in the first bud of attempted confidence."

"I thought you were asking for mine."

"Because you appeared unwilling to give it. Had you been as ready as of yore I should probably never have listened to a word."

"Merciless as ever," said the young man, looking down at the listless, ironical face with as near an approach to dislike as he dared to betray.

He disliked clever women, sharp women, satirical women. Alexis was a wonderful combination of all three. Her manifold contradictions had always

puzzled him. Her beauty had never allured, nor her fascination attracted. He had been familiar with them and their effects so long. He had felt a good-humoured contempt for the men who had adored her so madly, and been capable of so many follies for her sake. The merciless raillery; the almost contemptuous coldness; the irony of words and manner; the unfathomable depths of her nature; these were all things well known and, to him, without charm. At present she irritated him in an exceptional degree. Her keen, searching eyes seemed to read his heart; her light laugh stung him to anger. He had almost forgotten her existence; now it reminded him of duty, obligations, sacrifices—all things he most disliked and least desired to have recalled.

"My time," he said, with an effort at unconcern, "has been spent somewhat idly and unprofitably. You cannot wonder at that when you know——"

"That it is nearly three months since your sight was restored, and from that time you appear to have lost all interest in home and friends—to say nothing of relations."

"What folly!" he said impatiently. "I have been knocking about—seeing all sorts of places, that's all. I told you I went to Venice and Rome, and—and all those places sight-seeing. I can't expect you to show any interest in my opinion of them. You know them all by heart."

"Yes," she said quietly; "I think I do. On the whole you have shown consideration in not inflicting me with tourists' rhapsodies. Did you meet any of our mutual friends in the Winter Cities?"

"No."

"The Grahams I know were in Venice," she said, glancing at his abstracted face. "I thought you might have run across them."

"And you?" he asked abruptly. "How did you like America? What do you think of it?"

"I thought it very — large," she said gravely. "The people were much the same as the people one meets 'doing' Eu-rope. They always asked an infinitude of questions; they always wanted to know

one's family history, and one's family's family history five minutes after an introduction. They were extremely desirous to be communicative, which always bored me; and they were tiresomely good-natured, which always put me in a bad temper."

"I wonder," remarked her cousin, "if you have ever had a good word to say of any place or person that you have seen?"

"Not often," she said, laughing. "The places are generally so overpraised beforehand, that they affect me with instantaneous disappointment. The people are horribly uninteresting."

"What would you call 'interesting?'" he asked moodily. "Some melodramatic hero who had committed a murder—or some washed-out genius with a spite against mankind in general."

"Not at all," she said coolly. "I have met both classes, and I assure you they did not interest me in the very least."

"Met a murderer—you?" he scoffed incredulously.

"Yes," she answered with composure. "He had not absolutely shot or stabbed his victim, but he did as bad—he broke her heart; and she—she killed herself in despair. No one seemed to mind. Society petted him as much as ever. True—he was an Earl's eldest son."

Again that hot flush crept up to the young man's brow.

"Don't talk of such horrors," he said impatiently. "I wish you were more like other girls."

"Thank you for the wish; I don't echo it. Humanity is cut out too much on the same pattern for me not to be grateful that Nature varied it a little in my case."

She looked up at the blue sky with serene indifference. She knew she had ruffled his temper, and that pleased her, and made it easier to keep her own.

"I wonder you came back," she said at last.

He started a little. His thoughts had been travelling far away.

"My uncle wished it," he said.

"Oh! you should not mind papa. I never do."

"That is a dutiful remark, and essentially one of your speeches," said her cousin. "But every one has not your privileges. I have always obeyed Sir Roy's wishes."

"Yes," she said. "You have. Sometimes I wonder why?"

"Perhaps because I was taught obedience as a duty; perhaps because one so good and generous deserves a little consideration; perhaps——"

"I wouldn't say any more," she interposed, with her little slighting laugh. "Unless you add—perhaps because he is not your father, as he has the misfortune to be mine."

"Alexis," said the young man, "you have certainly been spoilt by over-indulgence. You have never known a care, or a sorrow——"

"That," she interpolated, "may be because I never cared for any one sufficiently to suffer on their account. You have always told me I am pre-eminently selfish."

"You convey it, I must say. Is it the fault of your temperament, your education, or your nature? I often wonder."

"I am obliged to you for taking the trouble to conjecture anything about me," she said coldly. "But to save you any more cogitation on the subject, I will tell you that it is only the fault of—myself. I believe I was born without a heart. I have never suffered from emotion in any shape or form. I am tolerably happy. I have everything I wish for, and I enjoy life as much as I care to enjoy it."

"And yet I never heard you say you were pleased at anything, or by anything, for any length of time."

"That is only because things in general are so very unsatisfactory, and I am too restless not to like change and variety. I like people and places very well for a week. After that I seem to know everything about them. It is their own fault. I prefer anything to monotony."

"I don't envy you your disposition," he said. "Of course you are a very clever person, and all that;

but your reading and your studying of character, and your habit of analysing every emotion, and ridiculing anything like deep feeling have only succeeded in making you cold and cynical, and unlike any other woman. I would rather have my own stupid brains, than your clever ones."

"Like the man with the deformed child, who said at least it was his own. Well, you have the sublime essence of life—content. It is only a few ridiculous people here and there who want to see into the depths of things, and fall out with them because they are only—shallows; only a few dissatisfied souls who cry out against the trumpery, and folly, and wickedness which make up the sum of life. No doubt you are happy, and I am—not. But then I am supremely selfish."

"You make yourself out worse than you are," he said magnanimously. "If you ever fall in love, that will wake the womanhood in your nature."

Her slight, scornful laugh fell across the warm spring air like a chime of bells.

"Thanks for the suggestion. I am not of the Chloe and Phyllis type of feminine nature. I never had and never shall have an atom of sentiment in me."

"Oh," he said good-humouredly, "that is all very fine as yet. Your time will come, as every one else's has come or will. You won't laugh, and jest, and sneer at everything then."

"You speak so confidently that I may conclude your 'time' is one of those fortunate experiences," she said, scoffingly. "Allow me to congratulate you. I thought your travels had not been wasted; but, as far as I am concerned, leave my fate out of the question, if you please. Why, how embarrassed you look! Wrong—of course I am wrong. No man ever yet confessed he had been guilty of such folly, unless he was compelled by circumstances. Sometimes the circumstances is a prospective mother-in-law; sometimes 'les convenances.' Which case is yours? Not the mother-in-law, I hope. She would be sure to be a dreadful foreign person, and as for the *fiancée*——"

"Alexis, for Heaven's sake hold your tongue."

He spoke so furiously and with such white heat of anger in his face, that the girl involuntarily obeyed him.

"Oh!" she said, coolly; "have I offended you? A thousand pardons. I thought you better-tempered than to fly into a passion at a jest. But, see, there is papa on the lawn. We will say nothing more about the 'circumstance' at present."

## CHAPTER II.

### "EMBARRAS DE RICHESSES."

Sir Roy Kenyon advanced eagerly to meet the two young people. He was a tall, finely-made man of some fifty years, with a face expressive of good-nature and indolence—the face of a man who had taken life easily all his days, and had a general dislike to "worry." Yet like many good-natured, lazy people, he could be firm almost to obstinacy when he chose, and there was a look of determination about the lips that contradicted somewhat the genial smile and the kindly eyes.

"Welcome back, Neale, my boy!" he said, shaking hands heartily with the young fellow. "This is a surprise. Why did you not write?"

"I thought I'd be here as soon as a letter, uncle, and you know I detest pen and ink."

"A family failing," said the elder man. "Well, no matter, so long as you are here. And so Dr. Grünbaum was as good as his word, and your sight is all right again. Bravo! Let me look at you. Yes—I declare your eyes look as well as ever they did. What do you think, Alexis?"

"I have not looked at them yet," she said tranquilly. "Neale says he can see, and he ought to know best."

"She has been pitching into me as usual," said Neale, deprecatingly. "Making me feel a fool before we exchanged twenty words."

"Oh, that is only her way," laughed her father. "We all get served alike."

"You have only just come here, I suppose?"

"Yes—we arrived on Saturday. Where is your baggage, by the way?"

"Bari is bringing it. He ought to be here soon. I walked up from the lodge."

"And how did you like Bari? Was he all his character stated?"

"Oh, he is a capital fellow," said Neale, cheerfully. "Talks all the languages—saves one no end of bother, and is not above putting his hand to anything."

"A treasure indeed," remarked Alexis. She had plucked a tea-rose from one of the pots which had been brought from the forcing-house, and was ruffling its delicate, perfumed petals in a listless fashion, as though the conversation did not interest her. "But, as a rule, confidential servants are a mistake. They impose on you, and get hold of your secrets—if you have any—and expect a premium for devotion all the time."

"Alexis is gonerally dissatisfied with everything and every one," said her father with an indulgent smile. "That comes of being a spoilt child."

The girl tossed aside her rose carelessly, and, with one of her rare impulses of tenderness, put her hand on her father's arm.

"You are to blame," she said. "You should have denied me indulgence now and then. But it is only a case of the crumpled rose-leaf—nothing more serious."

"Have you ever found your rose-leaf?" asked her cousin.

"Occasionally; or I think I have, which answers the same purpose. But confess I am right in being hard to please. Life is so made up of shams and affectations that no one dares to be honest or truthful. We are all more or less bound by the way we live, and yet the world compels us to pretend we're not. Society is tiresome; it is silly; it is profoundly

selfish; and yet we are bound to it in a way, and can't break our self-wrought chains, or won't, because it needs courage. If we love freedom and air, and the greenwood, and the mountains, we sacrifice them for the sake of social distinction, or worldly success, or ignoble ambitions. We abuse the world, and yet we can't turn our backs on it and do without it."

"You might," said her cousin, "if you wished. But I don't believe you do wish. You like your court about you, say what you may; and you wouldn't care for a long run of solitude—unless," he added meaningly, "it was a *solitude à deux;* and that wouldn't last a month with one so fickle."

"It will never last at all with me," she said scornfully. "How often am I to tell you that sentiment and I are utterly at variance?"

"You always did jest about what is serious and earnest to most women's lives," began Sir Roy.

"I am not jesting at all," she interrupted. "I speak exactly as I think. Why should I not? I have seen enough of men, and human nature in all its aspects, to be able to form some opinion of them."

"That," said her cousin, "is, as I said before, your misfortune. You dissect and analyse so unmercifully that enjoyment or appreciation becomes impossible. You were created with a capacity for both, but you have done your best to destroy them, not caring how much you lose thereby."

"That is the case, I fear," said Sir Roy, looking somewhat regretfully at the delicate, clear-cut face, with its lovely, scornful mouth. "If she could feel more human interest, and less contempt, she would be happier."

"I never said I was not happy," the girl interposed, "though it is only a word we interpret according to temperament. My idea of its meaning may be the opposite of yours, but that need not distress you. It is so exasperating to want every one to think alike."

She drew her hand away from his arm, and moved on over the smooth green turf, towards the terrace.

The eyes of the two men followed her, one with unlimited adoration, the other with a certain bewilderment.

"I never met any one like her," said the younger man, turning to his uncle. "Does nothing really please her?"

"I dare say some things do," he answered, "if, as she says, her way of being happy is a direct contradiction to ours."

"She would not accept the Prince after all?" questioned Neale.

"No. It was the usual answer—'he does not please me.' She does not want rank. Neale, my dear boy, I still hope my wish may be realised. She has never shown a shadow of preference for any man yet, save yourself, and I should feel happy—perfectly happy—in leaving her with you. You know her, and understand her. I am sure you would make her happier than any one else I know. She is attached to the old place, and it will be yours when I am no more;" and he glanced over the magnificent grounds, and to where the June sunlight lay red and warm upon the beautiful old Abbey.

It was as well he did not see his nephew's face. It had grown white and red by turns. He felt quite unable to frame a syllable in reply.

"You—indeed, sir—you are mistaken," he stammered at last. "If anything, I'm sure Alexis dislikes me. We are always quarrelling."

"Pooh, pooh—so much the better," interposed Sir Roy. "Doesn't some wise man say love ought to begin with 'a little aversion.' Believe me it is much better to marry some one whose tastes and disposition you know, than some stranger with a pretty face or a fascinating manner, whom you meet in society and of whom you know absolutely nothing until you are tied together. Comfort in matrimony is a great deal better than romance."

Neale could hardly restrain a smile. "Comfort and Alexis!" he thought, but he kept silent. He was indeed sorely discomposed by his uncle's remarks. Often as he had hinted at the possibility of a marriage

between his cousin and himself, he had never spoken so plainly as this.

"You ought to marry, and soon," persisted Sir Roy. "You have had time enough to sow your wild oats. I am getting on in years, and I should like to see you settled down, and your children running about the old quiet rooms, before I go the way of all flesh."

The young man's face grew cold and stern.

"I have no inclination for marriage yet," he said. "And Alexis dislikes me, if anything. I would not force myself on any woman, were she as lovely as Venus."

"Force!—force!—no one is talking of force!" exclaimed Sir Roy, petulantly. "And, I tell you, Alexis does not dislike you; far from it. Who should know her if I do not? Come—promise me you will do your best to win her. You can sell out, you know, and live here. I shall not trouble you much. Give me a corner, and my library, and my horse, and I shall be as happy as a king. Why, you look as if I were offering you poison! There are not many men who would have to be asked twice to accept Alexis Kenyon."

"It is not that—I feel the honour most deeply," stammered Neale. "But—I—I was not prepared."

"There is no one else in the background, is there?" asked his uncle, looking keenly at the young man's embarrassed face. "Come, be frank. Surely you have done with follies of that sort."

"Yes, of course," answered Neale, hurriedly. "Indeed—indeed it is only as I said, a natural disinclination for matrimony."

"Oh, well," said the Baronet, laughing good-humouredly. "That will soon wear off, if you accustom yourself to think of it. We all feel like that when we're young. But marriage is not such a terrible bugbear after all. In a month you'll tell me a different story. Why, here comes Bari with your luggage. You'd like to go to your room, I suppose. We dine at seven as usual. You'll find me in the smoking-room, if you want me."

He waved his hand and went off towards the

conservatories, where a white dress was fluttering among leaves and blossoms. He had better settle the matter now that he was in the mood, he thought, and Alexis was generally amenable to his wishes, when she saw his heart was set upon any special thing.

He overtook her among the aisles of palms and cacti, which were like a reminiscence of the Riviera. She turned as she heard his step, and greeted him with her slight, cool smile. "What have you done with Neale?" she asked. "I thought you would have enough to talk about till dinner-time."

"He has gone within," said her father. "He looks very well. Do you not think so? He is pleased to be home again."

"Indeed," she said indifferently. "He did not give me that impression."

"You always snub him and freeze him into silence. You treat him very unkindly, Alexis, and he feels it."

She glanced up quickly.

"Has he been complaining?" she asked, her lip curling scornfully.

"Oh, no; but I could read between the lines. Come, my child, listen to me for a few moments. You have been indulged all your life. I have denied you nothing that it was in my power to give you. Sometimes I think it has spoilt you a little; sometimes, that I would not have you different for all the world. You laugh at the love you win, and yet you have only to appear to win more. I think you would be happier if you allowed your feelings as much play as you do your intellect; if you did not deny your womanhood all that it has a right to exact—if——"

"My dear father," she interposed lightly, "have you come to deliver a sermon to me? Deny my womanhood! When did I ever do such a thing? You make me fancy I have been wearing a Bloomer costume, or driving tandem, or playing a billiard match, or something equally unfeminine; and I assure you I have done nothing of the sort. I like pretty dresses, and waltzing, and tennis, as much as any woman."

"You know," said her father impatiently, "that is

not what I mean. It is the way in which you treat men."

"I treat them as well as they deserve," she said indifferently.

"Will you never care for any one?" he asked.

She lifted her eyebrows with a pretty pretence of surprise.

"I care for — you," she said, with a sudden softening of the voice.

"Yes, dear," he said, "I know. But that is not all. Some day you must marry—you ought to marry —it is a woman's lot, you know. It makes me very anxious when I think of your future. I may not live long. My father, you know, died at forty-five, and we have never been a long-lived race. I wish with all my heart, child, that I could see you safely and happily settled before my time comes."

"Don't look so solemn," she said. "There is plenty of time before any contingency so alarming should arise."

"Have you never loved any one?" he persisted.

"Dear father," she said impatiently. "You know I have not. I am not romantic. I never was. I have no old letters, or faded roses, or keepsakes of any kind in my desk, and yet I am twenty-three, and have been in the world since I was fifteen. No; lovers have no charms for me—and marriage less."

"Still," he insisted, "you ought to marry."

She made a wry face. "I fail to see the obligation. If I were a Crown Princess——"

"You are my Princess," he said tenderly; "and I should like to see your children at my knee, and to know that you were happy and sheltered in a husband's love, before life and I had bade farewell to one another."

Her face flushed faintly; she turned a little aside.

"I fail to see how that could add to your happiness. I am sure," and she laughed again, "it could not possibly help mine."

"Yes, it would; you do not know," he urged.

"All your charms, your conquests, your successes, do not satisfy your heart."

"I should get tired of any man," she said. "I could not help it. They irritate me—they weary me. They could give me nothing for the sacrifice of myself. Marriage always seems to me a mistake. Binding yourself for life to one person, promising impossibilities! How can one answer for one's feelings? You can't swear to be the same in ten or twenty years' time as you are to-day; one's features alter, so does one's nature. You make marriage as commonplace as a lease—but not so comfortable. You can change or let your house again if you get tired of it—you can't your husband."

"Oh, Alexis," cried her father in despair, "you are too provoking. It is not right, it is not natural. Men are not so bad as you make out. They can be constant—steadfast—true."

"Not for long," she persisted; "and not to their own wives—to some one else's, I grant. They are like children: what is denied becomes immediately invested with a hundred charms; what is possessed becomes valueless."

"You make such sweeping assertions," he said impatiently, "you class all together. It is not fair. One man, at all events, has loved you very constantly—ever since he and you were boy and girl, despite your coldness and indifference."

"Or rather, you should say, because of it. Whose cause have you come to plead now?"

"Your cousin's!" he said abruptly.

She started. Again that faint rose-flush warmed her cheek.

"Nonsense!" she said sharply. "Neale—why, he cares no more for me than——"

"He does. Indeed he does," said her father eagerly; "only he has not courage to say so, you treat him so cruelly. And, Alexis, it is the dearest wish of my heart. The place will be his, you know that, and he understands you better than any one else. He is not very brilliant or very talented, but he is honest, and true, and deeply affectionate. He

will make you an admirable and indulgent husband. Will you consider the matter?"

"Oh," she said, and laughed a little, "that is easily promised. But really I think you are mistaken. If Neale cares for me—at all—he has never given me a hint of it."

"Because you always ridicule love and declarations. They never touch, they only amuse you. You treat men just as you like, and do with them as you please, and they bow to your will and submit. He knows that; and in his way he is proud. He would not care to be thrown aside like—like the others."

"I prefer a man to do his own wooing," she said.

"He will do it well enough when the time comes," said her father. "But, perhaps, he is afraid as yet of being added to the list of those you have made ridiculous. It is difficult to understand you, Alexis."

"My likings have generally grown into contempt," she said. "But that was not my fault."

"You might be very happy with Neale," urged her father.

"And the long lease?" she said, smiling. "I am afraid it would be a risk. True, as you say, we know the worst of one another. That is something."

"Then will you think of it, for my sake, dear child?"

"Well," she said reflectively, "it is not a very lover-like speech to make; but I would certainly think of it for your sake more readily than for his."

"And he may speak for himself some day?"

"Oh," she said, laughing, "he will not woo me half so eloquently as you have done. I think he had better make you his ambassador—if it is necessary to say any more. There is no hurry for a year or two."

## CHAPTER III.

### AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

Sir Roy said no more.

He was quite satisfied that his pet scheme would succeed. He would have his darling with him. The old house would still be graced and beautified by her presence. She would be happy, or as nearly happy, as her nature would permit—for he said to himself shrewdly, "a man who understands and suits a woman is infinitely preferable to one who only loves her."

And Neale, if somewhat weak and yielding, had no vices, and would let the wilful, capricious girl do pretty much as she pleased.

"It will be admirable in every way," he told himself, as he sat at dinner and looked at the two handsome faces—the girl's as delicate and pure as a white rose; the young fellow's bronzed, and manly, and full of fire and light.

Alexis was as cool and unembarrassed as ever. Occasionally she looked critically at her cousin, acknowledging to herself that she had rarely seen his equal for good looks. Long ago she had taken his mental measurement with the keen and merciless accuracy with which Nature had gifted her. She would always be the master-power, she knew, and would never do but what she chose. That thought pleased her.

"If I met a stronger will than mine, I should quarrel. I could never bend," she said to herself. "Certainly, as an institution, marriage is a mistake; but if a woman isn't married, after a certain time she is neglected by one sex, and the other say spiteful things about her. Then there are the properties. Papa can't bear the idea of the Abbey going out of the family, and I am the last in the direct line. Yes, I suppose I must do it—some day."

Meanwhile, there was no hurry; and she played

with her grapes; and glanced with half-amused consciousness at her cousin; and wondered if, after all, he had cared for her all these years. "I understand now why he was so embarrassed when I asked him whether 'his time' had come," she thought. "Poor, foolish, good-natured Neale! It must be odd to care like that! I can never imagine any individual becoming absolutely necessary to my happiness."

She left the table presently and went out into the grounds.

Sir Roy, in the jubilance of his spirits, filled his nephew's glass again, and drew his chair nearer.

"It will be all right," he said genially. "I have sounded her. It is just as I said. She is really fond of you, and quite ready to accept you when you ask. Isn't that good news, my boy?"

Neale's hand trembled so, that he hastily put down his glass. He felt absolutely confounded, and stared at his uncle as if he thought he had taken leave of his senses.

"No wonder you look surprised," continued Sir Roy. "Why, when you think of the chances that girl has had—wealth, station, titles—all refused! You ought to feel proud, and no mistake!"

"But, uncle," stammered Neale, "are you sure she said that? Are you not deceiving yourself?"

"Not in the least," answered the Baronet heartily. "You may plead your own cause when you will; only don't be in too great a hurry," he added. "For, after all, marriage does make a difference, and I don't want to give up my pet yet awhile."

"But I was going to rejoin my regiment," muttered Neale stupidly. "I told you I could only stay a week. Then I must go to London; my leave is up."

"Well; what of that?" laughed Sir Roy. "Get the matter settled before you go. I've smoothed the way for you, I can tell you. I don't wonder at your being afraid to propose. She is so awfully sharp and clever. She takes the wind out of your sails before you know where you are."

But the young man sat on, absolutely stupefied. What scurvy trick had Fate played him? Marry!

It was impossible! And yet how could he break the news to his uncle? how set himself right in the eyes of this pale, proud girl, who was haughty as any queen, and had never yet deigned to answer with favour the wooing of any man?

For an instant his heart gave a thrill of triumph, ignoble enough to make him speedily ashamed. But he lacked courage to speak out the honest truth. He wavered now, as he had done in another crisis of his life, and so wavering, he let the moment slip, and saw his uncle set his empty glass down and rise from his seat, while still shame and confusion held him dumb.

"I am going to my study," said Sir Roy. "You will find Alexis in the garden. Tell her to give you some music. She sings better than ever."

But the young man felt bitterly enraged. He could not understand how such a thing had come about. Surely Alexis was jesting! It was on a par with her love of tormenting—the passionless insolence under whose lash he had too often writhed.

"She thinks I am a fool," he said bitterly: "or is it possible that she suspects a rival, and takes this means of assuring herself as to the fact? Well, why should I give her any satisfaction? I am not bound to tell her my private affairs."

He flung himself out of the house, feeling very much aggrieved. "It's a devil of a scrape," he said over and over again, "and how to get out of it I don't know. I suppose I must trust to chance. But I wouldn't wrong Gretchen for the world, poor little, trustful darling!"

Then he lit a cigar and strolled away in an opposite direction to that he had seen Alexis take. His thoughts were not with her, beautiful and fascinating as she was. No, they turned half in regret, half in longing, to a little house—ivy-shaded and rose-entwined, not fifty miles from where he now stood—a little house where a face, beautiful with love and dawning womanhood, would look out in anxious expectance of his coming. It was very solitary and very lonely; but he had left a good elderly woman-servant in charge of his treasure, and she was so simple of taste and

habit that he feared no demon of discontent entering into his Eden. He knew how she would spend her time—studying his language to please him with her proficiency; thinking of him; writing to him; going for solitary rambles in the woods or by the river; living so purely and innocently that it was a reproach to his own selfishness; and ready to adore him afresh the moment he returned to her side.

He paused, and looked up to where the disc of the moon showed pale and bright against the low belt of the far-off woods. He felt a sudden yearning, a longing indescribable for that lovely face, those tender lips. No gesture, no passionate exclamation betrayed his desire; but yet it seemed to fill his whole soul until he grew sick and faint under its weight. Then a sudden smart as of hot tears came to his eyes, and a pang of self-upbraiding rent his heart.

"Heaven forgive me!" he muttered below his breath; "and keep her from ever guessing the truth!"

The low-breathed words passed like a sigh of the wind, and seemed to recall him to himself. He half started, then turned away, and pulling his hat low down upon his brows, took his way to the woods, whose solitude and silence seemed preferable to his cousin's merciless wit.

Meanwhile Sir Roy sat in his study musing and thoughtful. After some quarter of an hour of consideration he rang the bell, and told the man who answered it to send Bari, Mr. Kenyon's servant, to him.

When the man appeared, Sir Roy took out one or two letters from a drawer in his writing-table and laid them before him.

"Well, Bari," he said, "you have kept your word and have won your reward. Here is the sum I promised you;" and he handed him a fifty-pound note. "You are sure," he went on, interrupting the man's thanks, "that your young master is heart-free, and—the—the little episode has blown over?"

"Quite sure, Sir Roy. As I told you from Venice—it was only a little fancy, an excusable fancy for a pretty little peasant girl. Nothing to alarm you."

"Still," said the Baronet, "I hope he behaved as—as a gentleman. What became of the girl?"

A little, odd smile hovered over the thin lips of the Italian.

"She received enough to make her more than content, Milord," he said, meaningly.

"I should not like any harm to happen to her, you know," persisted Sir Roy. "These little entanglements sometimes have tragic issues."

"Milord need fear no issue that would alarm him. Still, if I might venture to suggest, with all respect, the marriage with Milord's daughter might be reasonably arranged now. A young man after such an affair is better for having his future settled."

"It is settled," said Sir Roy gleefully. "They are engaged, and will be married before the year is out, I hope."

The man's face was too well trained to betray the surprise he felt. It remained impassive as ever as he said:

"I am glad to hear it, Milord. I—I trust I have performed my duty satisfactorily."

"Quite so—quite so," said Sir Roy. "Of course I have said nothing to my nephew about the—young person. These matters are best ignored. We were all young once. It doesn't do to be hard on little follies. Still, not a word must reach my daughter's ears."

"Milord may rely on my discretion," murmured Bari respectfully, as he bowed himself out.

When he had closed the door behind him, a change almost satanic came over his dark, placid face.

"You have done well, my friend," he said, apostrophising himself with self-gratulation. "The old man pays for your confidence, the young for your secrecy. When the marriage is accomplished there will be still more to get, for fear Madame might hear a little secret that would disturb the matrimonial calm. Ha! ha! but they are fools, these English! They can't see one square inch beyond the noses of their faces."

With which vulgar, if somewhat accurate observation, he took himself off to his own quarters to

smoke cigarettes in solitary content, and build up further schemes for his own future benefit.

Meanwhile Alexis Kenyon had been sauntering through the rose garden, where those loveliest of all flowers were showing themselves in all their glory amongst the fresh green leaves.

It was a warm and lovely night. The sky was softly blue, the white lustre of the moon fell upon the gardens, the terraces, the deep belt of woods, and the grand old Abbey itself.

Her eyes grew wistful and soft as she looked at it all — there, in the solitude and fragrance of the famous rose aisles.

"It is about the only place I really do care for," she thought. "I should not like to leave it, or see a stranger reigning here. Why do people make such idiotic laws? As if I could not manage the property as well as any man!" She sighed a little, and moved away down the trellised walk.

"I suppose my father is right. I must marry some day—most of the girls who were 'out' with me have married long ago. There is certainly nothing that could tempt me that has not been offered, and all has failed up to now. I have no illusions—I certainly have no sentiment. There will be no chance of either fidelity or faithlessness affecting my heart too deeply for its own comfort. I wish, sometimes, that I could commit the folly of 'falling in love,' but I never shall do that now. I am too old for one thing, and too cold-hearted for another. Nature must have left something out when she made me. It looks such folly—it has always looked such folly—that caring for another life till all one's weal and woe go with it, bound like warp and woof in one fabric of entirety. Still, I know my *première jeunesse* has passed, and the preface of life is over. If I married now, I should lose none of my power, and gain the additional charm of 'unattainability.' As for happiness, it is only a word whose individual meaning we interpret according to our fancy. I don't know that it affects the intellect as well as the senses. I should imagine not!"

She had wandered on heedlessly, and now found herself far beyond the boundary of the rose garden, and close to a small iron gate which gave access to a little wood of dwarf firs. She tried the gate; it was unlocked, and yielded at once.

"I have never been here that I can remember," she thought in some surprise, and moved by a faint curiosity she entered, and took a footpath through the trees—a mere track made by the gardeners, which led again to a wild and almost uncultivated tract of ground, all shadowy and dark beneath the drooping branches of many old and thick-leaved trees, which skirted it in on every side.

She went straight on through the dusky gloom that was penetrated here and there by gleams of moonlight, impelled merely by a spirit of curiosity, and a certain restlessness born of the new current of thought her father's words had set in motion that day.

Suddenly she heard voices. She paused, looking through the belt of shadow and moonlight with a faint curiosity as to the speakers. Then one voice, slightly raised in surprise—and almost, she thought, in anger—struck familiarly on her ear.

It was the voice of Neale Kenyon.

Half unconsciously she advanced; some half dozen steps brought her to where her cousin stood. He was leaning against a tree, and smoking. Before him stood a man—a stranger to her—a man neither young nor old, neither good-looking nor ugly, yet a man with a nameless something about face and figure that arrested her attention immediately.

He was speaking now; his voice was low and deep, and full of music, a voice that was a power in itself, and held all the eloquence and magic of oratory even in its simplest expressions.

She did not heed what he was saying. The sentence indeed ended in an abrupt pause, for the rustle of her dress caught the speaker's ear, and he lifted his head and looked full at her. Neale Kenyon turned hastily, and saw her also.

With an effort he cleared his voice, and tried to

speak unconcernedly. "Alexis—you here! How in the world did you find your way to such a wilderness?"

She came forward then with her usual indolent grace—her face faintly flushed with exercise.

The stranger involuntarily stepped back a pace or two, and raised his hat. She looked inquiringly at Kenyon. "A friend of yours?" she asked.

The colour involuntarily deserted his face and lips.

"A—a travelling acquaintance. We—we met abroad," he stammered disconcertedly. "The Rev. Adrian Lyle—my cousin, Miss Kenyon!"

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE TANGLED WEB.

At the introduction Alexis Kenyon impulsively stretched out her hand.

"I heard you preach on Sunday," she exclaimed eagerly; "and the Rector called yesterday, and was speaking so much about you. I can't look upon you as a stranger!"

Adrian Lyle took the beautiful hand so frankly and graciously extended.

"I am afraid," he said, "that the circumstances of our acquaintanceship are not auspicious. I am trespassing on your father's grounds—so at least your cousin informed me a few moments ago—but perhaps my explanation——"

She stopped him with a gesture. "Do not explain," she said, "it would only bore me, and it could make no difference. Of course you would have called one day or other. Chance has hastened your visit—that is all. Will you come to the Abbey and see my father?"

"Not to-night, if you will excuse me," the young clergyman answered. "It is somewhat late for a call;

and, to tell you the truth, I am in haste to reach the village. I was told there was a short cut through the park that I might use, but I fear I have missed it."

"The explanation, after all," said Alexis, smiling. "Yes, this is not the way; but my cousin will soon put you right," she added, turning to Neale.

He did not look pleased at the task, but politeness forbade any outward expression of reluctance; besides he was in momentary dread that Adrian Lyle might let fall something about their former acquaintanceship and its attendant circumstances.

"Of course," he said; "I shall be delighted."

"And your visit," said Alexis, "is only postponed. You said something on Sunday that surprised me—from a pulpit. I have a fancy that you are not orthodox, any more than myself. Your Rector and I always quarrel. I believe he thinks I am next door to a heathen. But indeed I am not; only it is stupid to think exactly like every one else—that is to say, if you give yourself the trouble of thinking at all. Most people don't."

The young clergyman surveyed her gravely, and with some surprise.

"Was I unorthodox?" he said. "I thought I was particularly careful."

"You said that ignorance of scientific facts, blind belief, and hysterical emotion, constituted the general idea of religion—a religion devoid of use, or comfort, or content. You see I have a good memory, Mr. Lyle."

"Yes," he said, with a smile at the beautiful face, which had no listlessness and no irony now. "And did you think I was wrong in saying so much?"

"On the contrary. I quite agreed with you. I am not a religious person myself," she went on coolly. "If I have ever had convictions they have never been of the right sort, and I have never found any one capable of convincing me that faith is not an accident of birth, and morality a mere matter of temperament. I have been worried and lectured by upholders of all creeds, until I quite sympathised with the vengeance of that bewildered heathen whose

natural instincts got the better of conversion. Do you know the story?"

"No," said Adrian Lyle, with a smile. "I should like to hear it."

"Well, first a Roman Catholic missionary went out to this benighted savage, and his teaching was so effective that he became a Roman Catholic, and made his tribe follow his example. A short time afterwards a Protestant missionary arrived on the scene, and he got the ear of the sable monarch and persuaded him that his faith was all wrong, and so worked upon his feelings that he recanted, and was baptized, and received into the new Church. A year or so passed by when, by some good fortune, a Dissenter came to the island, and he being a zealous and very pious man, straightway took it into his head that he must convert the chief to his form of worship. That dignitary lost his patience, called his tribe together, and summoned the three missionaries to be present. He then explained to his followers that, as the white man's God seemed such a very troublesome being to worship, he thought they had best return to their old ways, and ended his discourse by requesting that the three teachers might be served up for supper at the grand festival that would effectually celebrate that return! What do you think of the story?" she added, glancing with demure eyes at Adrian Lyle's grave face.

"I think," he said, "that my sympathies go with the poor savage. I never allege that religion and creed are one and the same thing."

"Then," said Alexis, "you are the first sensible clergyman I have ever met. Each sect wants the monopoly. Their creed, their faith, their Church—no other. The others are all wrong. For my part, there is no class with whom I have greater sympathy than Jews. I have found more clever, brilliant, and high-minded people among the Jews—I mean the strict conforming Jews—than among the so-called Christians, whether High Church, Low Church, or Nonconformists. You see my sympathies are liberal, Mr. Lyle."

"Have you made yourself acquainted with the doctrines of each class?" asked Adrian Lyle.

"Yes, and with many more that I have not named."

"Are we to stand here all night while you expound them?" demanded her cousin sarcastically. "I should recommend a retreat to the house."

"Neale thinks there is a time and place for all things," said Alexis. "Perhaps he is right."

"I certainly cannot see why you should begin a religious argument now," said Kenyon sulkily.

He was nervous and impatient. Every moment that kept Adrian Lyle by his cousin's side was a moment of danger.

Alexis looked at him critically, and then turned and met the glance of the young clergyman. It was more speculative than admiring, and, as such, interested her for the first time by the absolute novelty of what it conveyed.

"I will not detain you any longer," she said. "Neale is right. Neither place nor time is suitable for such a discussion as we were drifting into."

Then a little mysterious smile came to her lips.

"Consider it postponed," she said, and held out her hand with unusual cordiality. Adrian Lyle took it with a momentary wonder that it was so small and cool, and unlike any other woman's hand he had ever touched. Then she turned away without further words, and was lost to sight amidst the brushwood.

For a moment absolute silence reigned between the two young men, as Neale led the way back to the path.

Adrian Lyle was the first to break it.

"Your cousin, you said?" he remarked enquiringly. "Is—is your wife also staying with you at the Abbey?"

"No," said Neale almost sullenly. "Of course not. They know nothing about—that. My uncle would be furious if he knew, and I can't afford to ruin all my prospects. I suppose," he added turning to his companion, "I can trust you to keep my secret for a while, till I see how the old fellow is disposed."

"Have you done what you promised?" asked Adrian Lyle, slowly.

Neale was a few steps in advance; the darkness hid the flush that dyed his face and brow; his voice was low and unsteady as he answered:

"Yes, I have; and now I hold you to your side of the bargain. You will keep my secret until I give you leave to speak?"

"Yes," answered Adrian Lyle; "a promise is a promise; but I trust it may not be necessary to keep the secret very long. Her presence would win your forgiveness with any one, I feel assured. Why not confide in your cousin? They say she can do anything with her father."

"Confide in Alexis!" burst wrathfully from Neale Kenyon's lips. "Why, my uncle has made up his mind that I am to marry her! It has been an understood thing ever since we were children."

"All the more reason, then, that you should explain matters," said Adrian Lyle, coldly. "It seems to me you are wronging two women instead of one."

"Oh, my good sir," said Neale lightly, "you take too serious a view of the matter, I assure you. Gretchen is all right; and I am only awaiting a favourable opportunity to explain matters to Sir Roy. As for Miss Kenyon, she doesn't care a straw about me, so I'm not spoiling her prospects. She could marry a Duke or a Prince to-morrow if she pleased."

"Then why is Sir Roy so bent on her marrying you?" asked Adrian Lyle, in excusable surprise.

"Because he wants her to have the Abbey," answered the young man. "If he thought she or I would marry a stranger, he'd get married himself, in hopes of having an heir in the direct line. And there's every probability he would. In that case, farewell to my prospects. I am only a penniless Lieutenant in Her Majesty's service, and indebted to Sir Roy for an allowance like a school-boy. I can't afford to offend him—especially now," he added, with a sudden flush, as he remembered the comforts and luxuries he had provided for Gretchen.

Adrian Lyle's face grew sterner and colder than ever.

"You are not acting rightly, or honourably," he said.

Neale made an impatient gesture.

"I cannot expect you to understand," he said. "I might even tell you that you have no warrant for interference; but, let the future speak for me. If I could see my way clear, Heaven knows I would not hesitate; but I must wait, and trust to time."

He paused, and looked his companion in the face. "That," he said, pointing before him, "is your way. It seems odd that you should be here. You have taken the curacy, I suppose?"

"Yes," said the young clergyman gravely. "I came here last week. I knew Mr. Bray some years ago."

"I am only staying at the Abbey for a few days," said Kenyon hurriedly, as if offering an explanation. "Then I must run up to town to arrange about rejoining my regiment. It is at Madras at present."

Adrian Lyle pushed the dark wave of hair off from his brow—his face looked pale and disturbed.

"You will take her, I suppose," he said abruptly, "if you go?"

"Of course," Kenyon answered, with an inward feeling of irritation that any one save himself should allude to Gretchen as a personal pronoun.

There was a moment or two of silence.

Then Adrian Lyle glanced up at his companion's face. "I will wish you good-night," he said. "I am quite aware you look upon my being here as a misfortune; but, as you justly observed, I have no right to interfere with your actions."

"And I can depend on your silence?" exclaimed Kenyon eagerly.

A faint smile of contempt crossed the young clergyman's lips. "I have given you my word," he said coldly, and walked away under the heavy canopy of boughs, leaving Kenyon standing there perplexed and disturbed.

As the tall, erect figure disappeared in the distance, Neale turned homewards with knitted brow and stern, compressed lips.

"He—of all others," he muttered. "What scurvy tricks Fate plays!"

Some inward consciousness lit up his knowledge of his own actions, and showed them as burdened with results far different to those which he had proposed to himself. He was drifting into fresh entanglements. Sir Roy had absolutely forced him into a false position with his cousin; and that cousin herself, instead of helping him as he had expected, seemed determined to add fresh complications to his already complicated schemes.

"I believe it is sheer aggravation," he thought savagely. "If she'd only fall in love with some one! Why can't she? Other girls do readily enough; but that sphinx of coldness and incomprehensibility to spoil my plans like this! It's enough to make a fellow blow his brains out!"

He took off his hat, and let the cool night wind play over his heated forehead. His eyes gazed down the dim and leafy distance, yet saw nothing but endless vexations and worries arising out of one rash impulse that never till now had he confessed he regretted. Slowly and moodily he walked on—irresolute, impatient; but still pitying himself as the victim of circumstances, instead of acknowledging his fault in bringing those circumstances about.

"What could I have done?" he asked himself for the hundredth time. "It was a thousand pities I ever went to Dornbach; and then she was so sweet and so lovely—and—she showed so plainly that she loved me. I should have been a brute to throw her over, and yet—oh, confound that fellow Lyle! Who could have dreamt of his crossing my path? What a fool I was to make a friend of him! All clergymen are so fond of meddling in one's private affairs for 'conscience sake.' There's no doubt I'm in a most infernal fix, and how to get out of it I don't know. I really wonder that fellow didn't insist on proofs of my promise instead of accepting my bare word."

Then a hot flush swept to his brow, even in the darkness and solitude of the woods; for conscience whispered, "And your word was false!"

## CHAPTER V.

### "HOW ODD MEN ARE!"

DISTURBED and ill at ease Adrian Lyle took his way to the village. He paused once, and looked up at the clear evening sky, while an expression of deep pain clouded his face. "All these weary weeks and days," he muttered, "and my one prayer 'keep us apart!' and here temptation meets me over again! How it all comes back—my distrust of him—my compassion for her; compassion——!" he bent his head; a bitter smile crossed his lips. "Let me be honest with myself, is it only compassion? Why has all womanhood been to me but an impersonal thing till the day I looked on that sweet face? Why do I feel this nervous horror and hatred of Neale Kenyon, at the mere suspicion he has wronged that trusting child? Why do I long, yet dread, to meet her glance and hear her voice once more? Is it possible that I am too false and cowardly to confess the truth? Is it possible that I fail to realise what I dimly suspected, when I took counsel with myself among the lonely solitudes of Abruzzi?"

He bent his head. For a moment a sort of horror seemed to seize him. His power of will seemed gone, and he found himself face to face with an undreamt-of evil. "It is against conscience, against reason, against Heaven!" he muttered, aud with head down-bent he strode off rapidly, almost fiercely, through the darkening woods. But he knew, let it be against what it might, that the madness had crept into his soul, that for good or ill the light of Gretchen's eyes, the smile on Gretchen's lips, were to haunt his memory and people his dreams with sad and forlorn hopes, until his heart should cease to beat, and his pulses cease to thrill!

He had not even asked where she was; but that made no difference, she was a living presence whether near or afar. Like sunshine she had stolen across his

life—its hard duties, its painful struggles, its sad and sometimes hopeless efforts. Without consciousness, without desire, that lovely presence had set its seal upon his memory, and he could as soon forget the reality of his own existence, as the subtle sweetness of hers.

The thought of her in her innocent, unconscious happiness smote him like a cruel blow. Without a shadow to dim her belief in the man she loved; without one past experience to shake her faith in the existence of perpetual joy; with all the priceless illusions of youth, and hope, and unfailing trust: so the picture framed itself before his eyes, and seemed to ask his sympathy.

"Heaven grant she may never know!" he prayed, as the shadow of that old mistrust in Neale Kenyon robbed the picture of its brightness. "After all, he says he has kept his promise—and she is safe. Why can I not believe it?"

But, try as he might, he knew that such belief was not easy; that it had not banished the shadow of his old distrust even for one brief hour.

That night Alexis Kenyon dismissed her maid somewhat earlier than usual, and drawing her chair up to the open window with its wide, sweeping view of the beautiful grounds, and green level fields, and winding river, gave herself up to a long and somewhat serious train of thought.

"I shall be tired of him in a month," she said to herself. "And yet I think—yes, I am almost sure I shall marry him. It will be almost the first time I have obeyed my father in any desire or wish. I suppose I owe him something."

Her long, rich hair hung in heavy, curling masses about her slight figure; her face in the moon-rays looked pure and exquisite as sculpture; but the mouth was set in cold and scornful lines; her heart never quickened by one beat as she dwelt on her acknowleged lover and her probable marriage.

"How odd men are!" she mused, with that irony that was part of herself. "He has said nothing to-night. Is it because he feels secure or—afraid? I

hope he will not bore me with love-making. I should hate it."

Then she glanced up at the clear sky and the radiant starlight. Half unconsciously they associated themselves with the calm and thoughtful face on which to-night she had looked for the second time in her life.

"There are power and strength of character in him," she thought. "It would not be easy to overthrow the balance of that mind."

Then a little odd smile hovered over her lips.

"I should like to try, all the same," came drifting through her brain, with an ignoble desire, born more of idleness than of vanity.

For the first time, eyes that were critical almost to severity had met her own; lips unsmiling and unflattering had answered her light words.

"He is the sort of man who would have an ideal; but the ideal would not be like me," she thought. "Would it be possible to overthrow it, I wonder? The cloth does not alter the nature of the man beneath."

Yet as her thoughts dwelt on that face, at once so gentle and so cold, so patient and so strong, she felt that for the first time in her spoilt and selfish life she had met a nature which might resist or compel the wilfulness of her own.

She had a gift of reading character, and was seldom mistaken in her judgment. Few men were ever capable of raising more than a languid interest in her; still fewer failed to verify the course she predicted. But Adrian Lyle baffled her usual keen and ready penetration. She speculated about him now with something more nearly approaching interest than she had acknowledged herself capable of feeling. She even found herself dimly wondering when he would call, and how she could best surprise him into sympathy or excitement—anything to baffle that calm, grave strength which made her feel like a child in his presence, and half ashamed of the sophistries and ironies that seemed to ring false, like the base coin they were.

She rose at last and closed the window; a little shiver ran through her as she turned away. She stood upright before the long mirror that showed her the grace and slenderness of her figure in its loose draperies; the rich masses of hair that fell about her shoulders; the deep, mournful, far-searching gaze of her dark eyes.

"What do men see in me, I wonder?" she speculated, looking at herself as critically as she would have looked at a stranger. "There are hundreds of women more beautiful; there are thousands ready to love and adore, while I am completely indifferent; and yet——"

She turned away impatiently. A little, half suppressed sigh finished the sentence.

"Shall I ever care?" she thought, as she had thought scores and scores of times in her spoilt, capricious life. "I think not. I am beyond the age of illusions. I have not reached that of egotism. I doubt if there is any intermediate ground."

At breakfast next morning Neale Kenyon had quite recovered his spirits. Alexis was her usual, languid, scornful self, and scarcely seemed to notice his presence. This fact, however, did not seem to depress him in any way. With his customary disregard of consequences, he had made up his mind not to worry about his uncle's wishes, and just to let things drift. He would remain at the Abbey to-day, but that was all. On the morrow he must go up to town, and if he could rejoin his regiment at once, why, so much the better. Time would work wonders. Anything and everything might happen. The knot of entanglement might unravel itself, or be cut asunder. If only Sir Roy died unmarried, he would have nothing to fear for the future. He could acknowledge Gretchen before the world; and as for Alexis, she could take a Prince to console her if she liked. It would be easy enough to quarrel with her at any time. She was always giving occasion for it.

As these thoughts ran through his mind, he suddenly raised his eyes and met her glance. It was

indolent, amused, ironical. It sent a sudden rush of colour to his face, and made him wonder whether she had any suspicion of his thoughts.

"Will you see your friend to-day?" she asked carelessly. "If you do, invite him to dinner. I want papa to know him."

Neale looked at her stupidly.

"My friend?" he echoed.

"Oh," she said with impatience, "you know whom I mean. The curate, of course. Perhaps I should have said your travelling companion. Was he interesting?"

"Yes—es," stammered Neale, somewhat confusedly. "He is very clever, and—all that. Rather a prig, though."

"Indeed?" she said, as if amused at the description. "I should not have suspected it. You had not much in common, then?"

"You appear to be very much interested in Adrian Lyle!" said Neale, sulkily. "I always understood you hated curates."

"No, only pity them as a race. It has not yet been my good fortune to meet one who was in any degree a credit to his sex, or any ornament to his profession."

"And you think Adrian Lyle is both?"

"Oh, I did not admit that," she said, with her little ambiguous smile. "Let me see! His social status makes him the servant of our worthy Mr. Bray; obedient to his orders, and amenable to his superior judgment—an odd arrangement, when you consider the different mental force of each man; an arrangement only possible to such a body as are the superior clergy—a body whose head and chief can 'license' an educated and well-born gentleman to an office as if he were a cabman or a publican."

"There must be a head and chief in all important matters," said Sir Roy, looking up. "What a Radical you are, Alexis!"

"Oh, I assure you I am not," she said gravely. "I am only upholding the superiority of mind over matter, and wondering a little why Fate has seen fit

to place the Rev. Adrian Lyle under the rule and command of the Rev. Joseph Bray."

"He may rise to a Bishopric in time," said her cousin. "I suppose even Bishops were curates once."

"Adrian Lyle!" murmured Sir Roy. "Who is he? I seem to know the name."

"Mr. Bray was telling us about him," explained Alexis.

"Ah, to be sure—yes. Very clever, he said. Ask him to dinner, my dear, if you like him. Only I hope he has none of those new-fangled, half-Romish notions that are so much in fashion now. I can't stand that."

"Oh, he's all right," said Neale carelessly. "You may be sure of that, or Alexis wouldn't express interest in him."

"Did I express—interest?" said his cousin coolly. "Only curiosity, was it not?"

She looked at him with the demure unconsciousness of a child. She had discovered that the mention of Adrian Lyle's name disturbed and irritated him. She resolved to know the reason, and therefore the whim of bringing them together became gradually a fixed resolve.

"I think," she went on, as she lazily stirred her coffee, "you are not quite so good-tempered as you used to be. Perhaps that foreign tour has a little upset your digestion? That is always the secret of a man's amiability."

He did not answer for a moment or two. He found it more difficult than of yore to bear her raillery, or parry her sharp wit.

"You had better write your invitation, and I will leave it," he said at last. "Lyle is sure to be out district-visiting or something of that sort; and, as you are anxious to see him, it's a pity to leave it to chance."

She smiled and glanced at him somewhat meaningly.

"I am not anxious," she said; "or, if so, it is more on your account than my own. But your

suggestion is wise. Kind as chance usually is to me, I won't trust entirely to its good offices now."

Then she rose from the table.

"I am going to the library," she said. "Come to me in a quarter of an hour for the note."

As she left the room Sir Roy looked somewhat anxiously at his nephew.

"What is this new fancy?" he asked. "Usually Alexis never cares to ask any man here. Is this Adrian Lyle young?"

"I believe so," Neale answered moodily. "He's a man with opinions, at all events; perhaps that's why Alexis likes him. But there's one comfort, they're sure to argue and then quarrel."

Sir Roy laughed. "Well, my boy, don't get jealous. You know she is wilful, and perhaps I have spoilt her; but she'll turn out all right, never fear."

Neale made no answer, but devoted himself to his correspondence and papers, awaiting the expiration of that quarter of an hour, which he felt must bring about some explanation between himself and his cousin.

He dreaded it intensely, easy as it had looked when he had rehearsed the scene and the words to himself. His courage was oozing rapidly away, as Alexis in the library was dashing off the few graceful lines that invited Adrian Lyle there that night. When the moment arrived and he went into her presence, her keen eyes noted directly the signs of inward perturbation.

"He is going to propose," she thought, and involuntarily pushed the note aside, so that the delicate superscription no longer faced her.

Then she leant back in her chair, and looked with indolent amusement at Neale Kenyon's face.

"Have you anything on your mind?" she asked. "If so, I should advise you to unburden it. Your look is expressive of intense misery."

He coloured to the temples.

"Alexis," he said, "I—I want to know if it is true what—what my uncle has told me, that you have agreed——"

"Agreed to marry you?" she queried with unaltered composure. "Yes, it is true. I believe it is the first time in my life I ever have agreed to my father's wishes. But it is no new thing for either of us to hear. Weren't we betrothed in the nursery, or something to that effect?"

The blood had receded from Neale Kenyon's face, leaving it white as death.

She noted the signs of agitation with inward amusement.

"How odd that men should care like—that!" she thought to herself, and wondered, too, that neither thrill nor tremor disturbed her own serenity.

"It needn't make any difference yet," she went on presently. "We are both young enough to wait, and I should be sorry to interfere with your profession or its duties. You want to join your regiment, of course?"

"I—I was thinking so," he stammered confusedly.

Alexis glanced at him with a faint gleam of amusement in her dark eyes. "Assuredly being in love does not improve a man!" she thought—but aloud she merely said, "Do just as you please. There is no need to trumpet abroad the fact that two more idiots are about to make martyrs of themselves. For of course that's what it will come to; only I hope we shall be sensible enough to make our martyrdom as light as possible. If one chooses to wear peas in one's shoes, it is as well to boil them first."

"Really," he said, half indignant, half vexed at her tone, "you pay yourself a poor compliment."

She shrugged her shoulders and put on her air of cold indifference. "I am only stating a fact," she said. "It is absurd to pretend there is any halo of romance about this affair. But it has to be done, and we may be just as good friends as ever. Papa set his heart on the match when we were in the schoolroom. It is no new thing—is it?"

"You—you wish no mention to be made of it at present?" he asked with hesitation, and looking with ill-concealed dread at the note on the writing-table.

"Certainly. There will be time enough to speak

about it, when—well—when you return from India. Isn't it to India that you are going? We have made papa happy, and set his mind at rest. If there is a satisfaction in doing one's duty, we ought to be experiencing it. Are you?"

Again that hot flush mounted to his temples. He felt that he almost hated this mocking, cold-hearted creature. She leant back there, making a perfect picture—as she had a way of doing—against the dark oak and sombre colouring around her. The long soft folds of creamy Indian silk, touched here and there with knots of palest primrose ribbon, floated around her as no other woman's draperies ever seemed to float. Neale could not help giving some admiration to the picture, though he felt none at that moment for the woman.

"What I experience or feel can't be of much account to you," he said indignantly. "Of course you will please yourself, as you always do. I would only like to say that you are not to consider yourself bound in any way if—if you ever should change your mind. I don't want you to make any sacrifice, or—or——"

"I think," she said mockingly, "I would let that sentence stand as it is. You really can't improve it. Of course I am overwhelmed with gratitude at your magnanimity. I will do you the justice to believe that you care for me infinitely more than I deserve. All the same, having arrived at this happy understanding, it would be somewhat unfair, would it not, if I tossed you aside at the first passing whim? No; I think you may trust me, even if you are in—India."

She smiled at him with that little odd, mysterious smile he knew so well, and extended her hand.

"I suppose," she said, as he took it and laid his lips on the cool, fair skin, "I ought to be magnanimous, too. So I will give you permission to go where you like, and do what you please for a year. At the end of that time you may report yourself if you feel inclined. And now there's nothing more to be said, I fancy. There is my note. *Au revoir.*"

She rose as she spoke, and looked at him. Again he felt the colour spring to his brow, and raged

inwardly at its false interpretation. He could say nothing. He felt stupefied and bewildered. He went to the door and opened it, and she passed out without another word.

Then, as the door closed, he seized the note, and gazed at the address upon it with a sudden sense of rage and terror.

"If ever they become friends?" he thought.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### CONTRASTS

ADRIAN LYLE found that delicate-scented note awaiting him, when he came home from a round of parish duties to his midday meal.

The clear, graceful writing, the subtle, faint perfume, brought its writer before him with almost startling distinctness. He remembered the exquisite face; the dark, mocking eyes; the sweet, vibrating voice; and thought to himself, "She is Gretchen's rival, and a dangerous one. I must watch how matters go between herself and Kenyon."

With that end and purpose he found himself in the beautiful old oak-panelled dining-room that night, one among a very small circle of guests who had arrived that day at the Abbey.

Keenly as he watched, he could detect no signs of secret understanding between Neale and his cousin. Lovely as a dream, and bewildering as a puzzle, Alexis Kenyon aroused his interest and enchained his attention, almost against his will. She was so graceful, so animated, so audacious, so cool, so changeful in speech and expression, that she certainly made a picture of original womanhood, baffling and entertaining him at one and the same moment.

There were two other ladies of the party—one young and lovely, one middle-aged and clever. A

celebrated statesman; a young and talented artist, who had leaped at one bound to fame and success; and a cynical and somewhat eccentric author, for whose works Alexis had a great admiration, completed the party.

The party was brilliant and well assorted; but Adrian Lyle noticed that one and all paid involuntary homage to the young hostess; that her keen and graceful wit, and delicate ironies kept the ball of conversation flying with startling and bewildering rapidity. He did not wonder that her father was proud of her; that the devotion and worship of his kindly nature were so self-evident and so excusable. But it seemed to him that Kenyon displayed an almost nervous horror of his clever cousin. He was silent, absent, uncomfortable. He spoke but seldom, and never by any chance took part in the brilliant dialogue that sparkled round the flower-laden table.

Adrian Lyle himself was rather a listener to, than a participator in, the conversation. He thought his lovely young hostess charming, as a woman of the world; further than that his thoughts did not go at present.

He would have been surprised had he known that those brilliant eyes of hers noted every shade of expression on his face; that she could have described the shape of his head, the broad, sweeping wave of hair tossed so carelessly back from the grave and kindly brow, the whole power and strength and gentleness of the face that was at once so impressive and attractive.

Almost against her will, Alexis Kenyon was conscious of noticing and remembering these things; of feeling that this man's presence had brought a new element of interest into her spoilt, capricious life. That sense of power and strength, of firm will and gentle nature which Adrian Lyle conveyed, was to her something novel and, as yet, attractive. She could not understand why, or how, he conveyed all this to her. Their acquaintance had been brief; they had scarcely exchanged a dozen sentences to-night; but Adrian Lyle's individuality stamped all he said, and

lingered in her memory long after wittier and more brilliant words had faded into forgetfulness.

"He does not like me," she thought to herself, as she rose from the table at last. "I wonder why."

A little sense of amusement crept into her heart, and something, too, that was very like pique and annoyance. It was so unusual, so surprising to find herself no more than any other woman in the eyes of a man, and a man, too, in whom she had condescended to feel interest.

The great drawing-room was dimly lit by rose-shaded lamps. The windows were open on the terrace. The pretty girl, who was a skilful musician, went up to the open piano and began playing a dreamy, tender melody of Schubert's. Her aunt, Lady Breresford, who was one of Alexis Kenyon's rare favourites, seated herself beside her young hostess near the window.

"Who is your new friend?" she asked. "Clerical, is he not?"

"Yes," said Alexis; "a curate. He does not look like one, though."

"No," said Lady Breresford. "He has an air of great dignity. He impresses one with a sense of power that is withheld for occasion, so it seems to me."

"Perhaps," said Alexis coolly, "the occasion will arise. Bishops have been curates once."

"It is a new element for you to introduce," remarked Lady Breresford. "You have always professed dislike for Church dignitaries."

"But he is not a dignitary—yet," she answered, and gave a little yawn, and looked out at the clear June stars with a bored and somewhat listless expression. "I think I will go out on the terrace," she said, rising. "Will you come?"

"Thank you, no," laughed the elder lady. "I am beyond the age of moonlight and illusions, and I see no use in courting neuralgia. I will remain here and listen to Fay."

"Fay's music is delightful," said Alexis, standing

midway between the window and the terrace on which it opened, while she wound a delicate lace scarf round her shoulders. "But I can hear it quite as well here, and I do not suffer from neuralgia."

"Nor from anything else," said Lady Breresford, looking somewhat curiously at the delicate face that was as perfect as a cameo in the moonlight. "Not even a heartache."

Alexis laughed.

"No, that least of all. I can't imagine such a thing. I believe it is a poetic nickname for boredom, spite, or indigestion."

"I hope," said Lady Breresford, "you may never find it anything else. You have caused it often enough to fear retribution."

Alexis only smiled, and moved slowly away. As she did so, the door opened and the gentlemen entered. It did not in any way surprise Lady Breresford that one and all looked round the room, as if in search of some one whose absence made itself instantly apparent.

She left her seat and laughed good-humouredly.

"Miss Kenyon is out on the terrace," she said, and watched the general movement towards the window with evident amusement. "What is it she does to them?" she thought. "She never cares. Perhaps it is just that."

Her niece left the piano and approached. Neale Kenyon suggested that they should follow the general exodus, and she assented. Sir Roy and Lady Breresford alone remained in the drawing-room.

The group without met, spoke, and separated into twos and threes. It surprised Adrian Lyle somewhat to find himself walking along beside the spoilt and wilful beauty, nor was he quite aware how it came about.

"What a lovely night!" he said, pausing involuntarily under the white and radiant moonlight, which showed the whole extent of the gardens and park. "I don't wonder at your coming out here. It seems a sin to sit indoors."

"Yes," she said. "One sacrifices a great deal to conventional duties. It is very foolish."

"This is a perfect place," said Adrian Lyle, his eyes wandering from point to point of the beautiful grounds. "You ought to be happy as its mistress."

"Do you think I hold it *par droit du roi?*" she asked, laughing. "I assure you I do not—only by a very insecure tenure; indeed, I have often wondered my father never married again. He might do so still."

"When he is so entirely devoted to you? I scarcely think it."

"I don't believe in entire devotion," she said. "It is one of those phrases one uses because they sound well; but it conveys a great deal more than is correct."

"You believe in very few things, I fancy," said Adrian Lyle, looking gravely and critically at the pale, lovely face, to which the moonlight lent additional purity and beauty.

"Very few," she agreed tranquilly. "I have proved their worth too often."

"A melancholy truth. Perhaps you judge too rapidly and too harshly."

"I judge," she said, "as I find things and—persons. Of course, one can imagine them charming, if one wishes. I like to look beneath the surface."

"So do I," he said, smiling involuntarily. "And have you found nothing and no one to stand that test?"

"As yet, no. I believe there is no such thing as a perfectly sincere person in the world."

"That is a sweeping accusation," he said calmly. "Sincerity, you know, is not always flattering, and probably you have often turned aside the blunt edge of a truth by your own fascination. Do you expect every one to say what they think? I fear society would not turn on such smoothly-oiled hinges if that were the case."

"Society!" she echoed scornfully. "Oh, how sick I am of the word! It has sounded in my ears since I could walk alone. Sometimes I think I will leave the world altogether and enter a convent."

"I would not," he said, "were I you. The

leaven of your discontent would affect a smaller circle than it touches at present, but perhaps do more harm."

"Do you mean," she asked quickly, "that the fault lies with me?"

"I mean," he answered gently, yet rebukingly, "that when there is so much real sorrow, poverty, distress, and want in this poor work-a-day world of ours, it seems rather foolish to quarrel with an existence so perfectly conducive to happiness and content as yours might be."

"Might be? Yes. I have all the attributes of happiness, I know; but the reality—well, I have either no capacity to grasp it, or else it has a wider meaning than social success, a well-arranged household, or more admiration than is perhaps good for a woman. You see I am very frank. Can you read the secret of my discontent?"

"I should imagine it lies with yourself."

"I think so too, but that does not solve the problem of its existence. I have everything—therefore I am content with nothing. Can you suggest a remedy?"

"It would be a harsh one," he said, "and one that you would feel little inclined to follow. I should say, be more true to the natural instincts of womanhood; give your feelings more play, and your intellect less; look into the sufferings and necessities of humanity from a personal, not an abstract point of view; try to feel, instead of to analyse; expect less, and give more. I think you may be more disturbed, but you will certainly be less dissatisfied."

"To become that," she said coldly, "you would have to alter my whole nature; then I should cease to be myself, and it would not matter very much if I were happier or more contented. You cannot deny that life is intensely monotonous and extremely ill-balanced; it has either a surfeit of sweets or sours: the one wearies, the other hardens. I suppose weariness is the easier burden of the two."

"Miss Kenyon," said Adrian Lyle, almost severely, "your sophistries may be very clever and sound very

pretty to men and women of the world, but to me they ring hollow, as base coinage would. I don't know the cant of society, I don't wish to know it; but when a woman, young, beautiful, clever, and beloved, tells me that she is utterly dissatisfied with her lot, and utterly unable to find one good or true note in the vast music of humanity, she tells me a thing which I cannot believe, and for which I can give her no sympathy. The fault lies in herself, to my thinking, not in the world that she blames."

For a moment, a sense of outrage, of indignation, of intense and aroused pride held Alexis Kenyon utterly speechless. Never had any one dared to so arraign her actions, or speak such scathing rebuke. The very truth of Adrian Lyle's words cut through the threads of her cynical philosophy like a sword that severs flesh and bone. A sense of utter worthlessness, a bitter, shamefaced humility, shook her serene and scornful nature, and for one hateful moment bowed her to the dust before the first man who had dared to tell her the truth.

Then the feeling passed. Her imperious blood took fire. Wounded and incensed, yet too proud to show how deeply his words had cut, she turned her great luminous eyes upon Adrian Lyle's face.

"You are certainly sincere," she said. "No doubt the fault does lie with me; but, like most of your profession, you are quicker to blame than to suggest a remedy."

"In your case," he said, "I should not be so bold, though it lies almost at your door, would you condescend to seek it."

"I understand," she said, with her little chill smile, "you would like me to play Lady Bountiful—become ministering angel to the parish by way of making myself acquainted with real sorrow and necessities. I have tried it, and I assure you it did not interest me in the least. Sorrow is very egotistic, and necessity very—inodorous. I can't say they taught me any higher truths."

He looked at her with something that was almost scorn in his grand gray eyes. How mean, how

pitiful, how insignificant she was in those eyes at that moment, even she felt apparent.

What he might have said she never knew, for at that instant Neale Kenyon and his pretty companion paused beside them. The young man had noticed the long *tête-à-tête*, and had grown more and more uncomfortable at its duration.

"Are you preaching a sermon, Lyle?" he asked, with a little uneasy glance at his cousin's grave face and flashing eyes; "or trying to convert Alexis? Don't. It's time wasted, and she'll never be grateful for the attempt."

"I am not making it," said Adrian Lyle calmly. "We have been discussing generalities."

"Let us go in and have some music," suggested Neale. "The dew is falling, and it grows chilly."

Instinctively he approached his cousin, leaving Adrian Lyle beside pretty Fay Breresford.

"Come in and sing, won't you?" he asked persuasively. "You haven't once done so since I came back."

She took his offered arm. He thought she looked strangely pale and cold in the clear moon-rays.

"Yes, I will sing," she said with such meek acquiescence that her cousin was startled.

He did not know how fast her heart was throbbing, what a tumult of anger and futile disdain was thrilling in those beating pulses.

"Perhaps that will move him," she thought, for she had proved again and again the magic of a voice trained to perfection.

She sang that night as she seldom or never sang, for it rarely happened that she desired to please any special listener. Yet this listener was unmoved, to all appearance, and his courteous thanks were as cold as thanks could be.

"You do everything well," he said, "when you take the trouble."

She looked at him. A faint flush wavered over her fair face, her great eyes were brilliant as stars.

"There is not much trouble about that," she said, glancing at the music she still held. "And I wonder

you do not say it is only another display for the purpose of gratifying vanity."

When she had said the words she was sorry. They displayed pique, and she would not for worlds have him think that anything he had said had wounded her.

He smiled a little.

"Some successes," he said, "are never monotonous. A talent such as you possess is as capable of giving pleasure to others, as of gratifying yourself."

"Are you fond of music?" she asked suddenly.

His eyes flashed.

"I love it," he said. "It is my one weakness—if I may call it so."

"I thought you did not possess even one," she said tranquilly. "May I ask if you sing also?"

He looked a little disturbed.

"Yes, I sing," he said; "but not in drawing-rooms, or to fashionable audiences, and not ballads."

"I never supposed so," she said, as she tossed her song down on the piano. Then looking softly at him she said: "Will you favour me—not the audience? They are going to play cards. I should like to hear you."

For a moment he hesitated.

"I have not sung for a long time," he said at last, "and I have no music. The excuses sound conventional, I know; but they are quite true. Still, if you wish——"

"I do wish it very much," she said, leading the way to the piano. "Will you accompany yourself?"

"If you will allow me," he said; and he took his seat at the instrument, while the group at the further end of the room drew together round the card-table.

She seated herself on a low chair, a little to one side of him, but where she could see his face. What she expected she hardly knew, only that it seemed to her that the man could do nothing by halves—nothing imperfectly.

He struck a few chords almost at random. Then his voice rang out—clear, full, sonorous—in the "Salutaris Hostia" of a Mass he had heard and learnt in Rome.

The card-players dropped their cards in amazement, and turned as by common consent towards the singer. Alexis herself sat there quite still—scarcely breathing. She had never heard such a voice. It swept over her senses like a charm, rising in wonderful diapason clearer, and sweeter, and higher, perfect in melody and enunciation—seeming to breathe all that was most lofty and divine in the longing soul to that dim and far-off Being it worshipped. Then slowly, softly, reluctantly, the rich, soft notes died one by one away—the last chord echoed on the breathless silence.

He rose. For a second their eyes met, and in that second it seemed to her that all the littleness, all the arrogance, the petty vanities and selfishness of her life faced her, and held her shamed and silent.

Then something that was base and cruel leapt into her heart, and set her better feelings in savage and furious revolt.

Why should this man of all men make her feel so small and so contemptible? Even that one talent on which she prided herself, and which he had praised, he had swept into insignificance now. She rose, and something hard and defiant was in her face as she said coldly: "Your singing, Mr. Lyle, is too perfect for my poor thanks. I have never heard such a voice—off the stage."

He bowed gravely and turned away. Neale Kenyon was close beside him.

"How magnificently you sing!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I have never heard anything like it—never since I was in Venice. Do you remember——?"

He stopped abruptly and crimsoned to the roots of his hair. Adrian Lyle gave him a warning look. His own face grew pale and disturbed. Alexis noted the exchange of glances—the sudden gravity and coldness of Adrian Lyle's face.

"There is some mystery about that friendship," she thought to herself. "It shall go hard with them if ever I find it out."

## CHAPTER VII.

### "FAITH OR REASON."

THE next day Neale Kenyon went up to London. The small house-party at the Abbey did exactly as they pleased—the young hostess seeming, if anything, gayer, more capricious, and more brilliant even than her wont. Yet she herself knew that a restlessness, an irritation, a curious dissatisfaction, were ever at work in her heart now. The fact she allowed; the reason she ignored. Self-knowledge and self-depreciation are not very comfortable companions, she confessed to herself as the idle, pleasure-filled days drifted by, each bringing in its train additional ennui and additional discontent.

It angered her excessively to think that one man, and one of the very few men in whom she had ever condescended to interest herself, should have so thoroughly fathomed her nature, and should so hold it in his power to show her its weakness and egotism. She had seen him once or twice as she rode or drove, but she had not spoken to him since the night that had first made him her guest. She heard his praises constantly; his energy, his zeal, his unselfishness were themes on every tongue. They seemed to set him further and further away from her. She felt, for the first time, how useless and frivolous her own life was, and yet she resolved not to alter it, lest he should take the change as due to his influence or advice.

Sometimes, as she thought of his words on the terrace, of the look in the grand gray eyes, she told herself she hated him—hated him for showing how contemptible was her spoilt artificial life, and the very coldness and immobility on which she prided herself.

"It is ridiculous," she would say in her heart, "to suppose I could learn from the poor and the unhappy what the world has never taught me! Those who are ignorant are passively content—they know no better. Peasants who work in the fields and grub away in

their cottage-gardens think themselves in Paradise if any one gives them a sovereign, or a dinner—perhaps, of the two, they would prefer the dinner—and overwhelm one with gratitude for unlimited roast beef and beer. Now, no educated person would do that; and yet Mr. Lyle and his followers would say: 'See, here are content and gratitude!' I can have the sovereigns and the stalled ox every day of my life if I please, but certainly can neither feel nor express gratitude for them; therefore he looks upon me as a discontented person, and one unworthy of the so-called blessings of life. I suppose beer and beef would be a blessing, if I were hungry; but I have never had an opportunity of being—that."

Then she laughed softly at her own reasoning, and took up her big red parasol and went out on to the lawn, where the garden-chairs were placed under the great cedars.

Lady Breresford was there reading, and Alexis ordered the servants to bring them out some tea and fruit, and took a seat beside her friend.

"Every one is out," she said, "but ourselves. It is really too hot for any exertion. I wonder Fay never gets tired. She is full of life."

"Yes," said her aunt. "The child never has an idle moment."

"You say that," answered Alexis with a little smile, "as if it were a reproach. But Fay is young yet. She will grow wiser by the time she has worked off some of her superfluous energy. Now I——"

"You!" interposed Lady Breresford. "I never remember that you had any to work off—and I have known you a good many years!"

"That," said Alexis, "is a melancholy fact. Positively I begin to feel old. There seems so much to remember——"

"So long as you don't look old," interrupted Lady Breresford, "there is nothing to lament. As for remembering—you have always told me it was too much exertion. Have you changed your mind on that point?"

"Have I a mind to change? That is the question."

she asked ironically. "I begin to doubt it. I was almost told so the other night."

"Who was so bold?" asked her friend wonderingly. "Not a man, surely?"

"Would you call Mr. Lyle a man?"

"Most decidedly. But was he so audacious?"

"I don't know," the girl answered thoughtfully, "that I should call him that—exactly. He was only candid."

"Well," said Lady Breresford, "you always profess to admire candour—but perhaps you only meant in theory."

"It is apt to do away with comfortable impressions," said Alexis. "Mr. Lyle has what I should call a disturbing influence upon one. Did you not think so?"

"He never gave me an opportunity of judging," said the elder lady demurely. "He evidently found it more agreeable to find fault with you."

"Oh," she said indifferently, "that is his vocation. I expected it."

"You know you did nothing of the sort," said her friend quickly. "No man has ever yet dared to tell you that you are anything but an enchantress. And," she added, smiling a little, "I wonder where even Mr. Lyle found his courage."

"Must I again remind you that fault-finding is his vocation?" said Alexis coldly. "He has nothing but contempt for the frivolities of fashionable life. I am not surprised. It is a paltry thing—a jumble of discordants—a make-believe at enjoyment that is weariness, and pleasure that is bitter in its after taste. Wasted time, wasted regret, wasted energy, and all as the result of a mortal nature endowed with reason, imagination, capacity. It does look contemptible when one thinks of it. Even you must acknowledge that."

"Even I?" and Lady Breresford laughed. "I am not given to self-reproach, and I have not lived entirely for pleasure, though you appear to consider me a very worldly person. I have had a fair share of intellectual enjoyment, though I have not cultured my nature, as you have yours, at the expense of all that is simple, and homely, and natural. You are

dissatisfied with everything and everybody. Ther lies the shadow that haunts your life. Perhaps it i the phantom of a higher self that you deny. I thinl so, sometimes."

"I have no higher self," said the girl with sudde bitterness, "or else I have been deaf to its voice s long, that now I never hear it."

"You have a long future before you," said Lad Breresford gravely. "Why do you always speak a if the past were everything?"

"Because I hate to look forward," she cried witl sudden passion. "I have all I want materially; bu this discontent, this craving after something whic neither mind, nor soul, nor sense can satisfy, this i is that I dread in years to come. I am not old, I ar not stupid, and the world is good enough to call m fair; but for all that I can't say I have ever enjoye an hour of simple happiness, nor can I imagin myself doing so."

"You are unfortunate," said Lady Breresfor gravely. "Perhaps you expect too much of ever one and everything. And then," she added, lookin scrutinisingly at the delicate, lovely face, "you giv your mind all to do, your affections—nothing."

"Is that my fault?" said Alexis. "I am fastidiou I know. Can I help that? It is my nature—mysel so to say. I think I am more to be pitied tha blamed."

"So do I," said her friend frankly. "If yc could fall in love, now?"

Alexis gave a little impatient movement. shadow fell upon the grass under the great swayin cedar-boughs. As she half turned her graceful hea she saw Adrian Lyle standing behind her chair. Tl little start she gave was one of real, not affecte surprise.

"How did you come?" she asked, as she gav him her hand. "We did not see you."

"No; I know that," he said, turning to gre Lady Breresford. "I was on my way to the hous when I saw you on the lawn, so I took the liberty ( joining you. I wanted to ask your help in a ca

where womanly help will be of greatest service. I hope I may count on yours."

Lady Breresford looked somewhat amused.

"Miss Kenyon was just lamenting her uselessness," she said. "Your request is quite opportune."

"On the contrary," said Alexis, with her coldest air, "I never interfere with parish matters. I leave all that to my housekeeper."

"This matter," said Adrian Lyle, looking at her coldly and sternly, "is not one that is quite within the capacity of a—housekeeper. It needs womanly skill and refinement, not ostentatious charity. Excuse me if I have made a mistake in thinking I might count upon you."

"What is the case?" asked Lady Breresford; "may I hear it?"

Alexis turned aside with an air of indifference, and poured out some tea which one of the footmen had just set on the rustic table. A hot flush burned on her cheek, a sense as of personal affront rankled in her heart at the memory of that look from the young clergyman's eyes. Yet she listened eagerly for his next words.

"The story is very simple," he said gravely. "A young widow, married but two years, is left in absolute poverty by the sudden death of her husband. She is a lady—well educated, delicately nurtured, and now seeks employment of some kind by which to support herself independently. I thought, I hoped, that among Miss Kenyon's many friends something could be found for her. She is a good musician and linguist, thoroughly refined, and would, I am sure, be of service to any one needing a governess."

"Do you think I need one?" asked Alexis, with a little slighting laugh. "I assure you I detest the whole species. I have had ample experience of them. And I would never recommend any friend to inflict upon her family the discomforts I have undergone. As a rule they are a mistake, an intolerable nuisance, a——"

"Pardon me, Miss Kenyon," interposed Adrian Lyle, almost angrily. "If fortune has favoured you

above your fellow sisters, that gives you no right to abuse them. You surely can't mean what you say. Your very knowledge of the world must have shown you that there are misfortunes possible even to the rich and well-born. But where there is no sympathy one cannot expect assistance. Pray forget that I troubled you on this subject."

He spoke courteously; Alexis Kenyon was conscious of deserving his implied rebuke, but she would not acknowledge this.

"You should apply to Lady Breresford," she said, handing him a cup of tea as she spoke. "She is full of the charity you admire and extol, and I believe she thinks people are really grateful for her trouble on their behalf. For my part, I am sure that to benefit any one is the very surest way of making an enemy."

"I can quite imagine," said Adrian Lyle, "that it is possible to do so. But to avoid it is the secret of true charity."

"It is a secret," she said coolly, "that I have never learnt. And I am not sure that I care to do so. I am far too indifferent as to how people regard me. I certainly don't like to see them hungry, or thirsty, or in rags; but, if I give them food and clothes, I object to being overwhelmed with thanks for altering a state of things that merely offends my taste and sense of fitness. It would not please me in the least to be hailed as a benefactress, simply because I dislike dirt and want in the abstract."

"You have made quite a fine art of selfishness," said Adrian Lyle ironically "I wonder you don't write a treatise on it for the benefit of philanthropists."

She laughed, the clear, low, amused laughter that always irritated and annoyed him.

"Perhaps I will," she said, "some day. I have but scant pity for incompetence, failure, or stupidity. Those are the true secrets of poverty."

"I differ from you," said Adrian Lyle. "Poverty is a misfortune that sometimes the wisest amongst us cannot avert. It falls too often on the helpless, the young, the old, the suffering, from faults or crimes for which they have been in no way responsible."

"But they are links in the chain of incapacity or crime, even if they only show its result; and the result springs from the cause I have mentioned. Every theory has its first principle, so I am still right in the main point."

"Miss Kenyon," he said, smiling despite himself, "this is not the first time I have discovered that it is dangerous to argue with you. I bow to the inevitable. I shall not again attempt to plead the cause of the unfortunate in your ears."

"You take a romantic and impartial view of them and their cases," she said coolly. "Even look at the one in point! A man has no right to marry unless he can afford it. It is senseless and criminal, too, to entail upon a weak woman, or on helpless children, the fate which you say has overtaken this woman. But men are always selfish and inconsiderate where their passions are concerned."

"You make no allowance, then," he said, "for love; its strength, or desire, or fatality."

"Oh," said Lady Breresford, with evident amusement, "Miss Kenyon does not believe in love at all."

'Not as I have found it," said the girl scornfully.

"Mr. Lyle will, perhaps, favour us with his views as to its reality, or uses," suggested Lady Breresford.

"Madam," said the young clergyman, with a grave bow, "you lay too hard a task upon me. Besides, to one of my calling and profession——"

"I hope," she interrupted hastily, "you do not go in for the celibacy of the clergy."

A sudden flush mounted to his brow, as he caught the cool interrogative glance of Alexis Kenyon's dark eyes.

"No," he said, "far from it. But love, in the acceptance of the world that Miss Kenyon graces, has a different creed and code to that which I would give it."

"And what," asked Alexis ironically, "would be your creed and definition?"

He hesitated for a moment, reading only too plainly the defiance and arrogance of her glance.

"I have seen it," he said, "make the humblest lot

a blessing, even as its want has made the noblest and most fortunate a curse. I would define it as the common need of a common humanity, without which no life is complete, no heart satisfied. Not a thing of the senses, the imagination, the caprice of time, or place, or opportunity, such as the fashionable world miscalls its fleeting fancies, but a true and elevating devotion to something pure and worthy; a feeling that gives shape and force to our dreams of happiness, and lifts the soul to purer hopes and higher ambitions; that alleviates misfortunes, that ennobles Life; that sanctifies and comforts even Life's cruellest enemy—Death."

There was a moment's silence. It was broken by Alexis Kenyon's cold and slighting laugh.

"You are quite poetical, Mr. Lyle," she said. "What you say sounds all very pretty and romantic, but I should define love very differently. I should call it a momentary illusion, which captivates the senses, and renders a person utterly incapable of judging the captivator by any real or rational method. Were it anything different it would last, but it never does. I have never seen a love, however passionate and adoring, outlive one single year of its disenchanter—marriage. This proves what I say, that people are only loved for what one imagines in them, not for what they really are. I grant you, love may live where adverse fate has parted the lovers. They have still their illusion intact, and all the great love tragedies and histories of the world have been, so far, happy But if Juliet had lived to cook Romeo's dinners, or Beatrice to iron Dante's shirts, they would have had no history, and their love would have turned out as commonplace as our nineteenth-century prose."

"Really, my dear," said Lady Breresford, "you have the most singular ideas."

"They are quite true, if you would only search the question out, instead of accepting it as a truism. Mr. Lyle is too unworldly to do so; he keeps his illusion still in some secret chamber of his heart; but he may take my word for it, that his ideal is only a woman,

like any other woman, with nothing of the angel about her, save what his fancy pleases to bestow."

Adrian Lyle looked straight at the beautiful, cold face; his own was somewhat pale. A vision of Gretchen rose before him—Gretchen in her beautiful youth, her innocent faith, her simple happiness. Would love ever be to her what this cruel and merciless dissecter of human passions called it? The thought stung him with the sharpness of recognised possibility. It seemed to thrust away the sentiment, the sacredness, the glory of that passion which had been to her nature as sunlight to the folded buds, as the marvels of assured divinity to the credulous devotee.

"I am happy, Miss Kenyon," he said, "in having illusions such as you describe; and I am sorry that even your youth and beauty have brought you no faith in the sincerity of emotions you must have awakened."

"Do you wonder at it?" she asked suddenly, and looked at him with her strange, half-mournful eyes—eyes from which the longings and discontent of her strange nature looked wearily forth on the world she despised, and the men she scorned.

For a moment he returned that look, trying to fathom the real mystery of her dissatisfied soul. But he saw no further than others had seen; he read no more than others had read.

Yet suddenly her eyes drooped. A certain softness and regretfulness came over her face.

"I really would be tender-hearted—if I could," she said. "Perhaps it is my Russian blood—I do not know; only certainly I lack compassion."

"Lacking that," said Adrian Lyle, "means that you lack all that makes womanhood divine."

Something in his look and tone brought back the hardness and coldness she had for a moment laid aside.

"Have you found it divine?" she asked mockingly. "If so, do not seek disillusion through the prosaic portals of marriage. The clergy of all men should be celibate. They believe in angels."

Lady Breresford had left her seat and wandered a short distance off, and was feeding one of the peacocks with crumbs of cake. Adrian Lyle suddenly bent forward and looked straight into the beautiful, baffling face of his companion.

"Miss Kenyon," he said earnestly, "may I speak to you seriously and without offence?"

"Certainly," she said with equal gravity. "I have not the slightest objection to your converting me, if you can."

He put aside the challenge without remark.

"You do yourself a great injustice," he said, "when you speak of all that is best and noblest in life in so slighting a manner. I have no wish to preach to you—far from it; but it pains me to hear maxims so worldly, convictions so cruel, uttered by such young lips. You yourself confess you are not happy. Then why deny every possibility that might make you so? Do you think all those gifts of mind and body that you possess deserve no gratitude, or will exact no account? Do your sophisms, clever as they are, really satisfy your heart? Does the denial of the natural softness and requirements of womanhood find greater content in the development of your intellect, than it would in the awakening of your sympathies? I am sure it does not."

"I have never attempted to deny that I am not happy," she said softly, as she slowly pulled the petals of the rose that had fallen from her gown. "But can any of your creeds teach me to become so?"

"I think," he said, "they might, if only you would believe them. But you dissect even faith as mercilessly as the flower you hold in your hand."

"Faith in the abstract—yes. How are you to convince me that I am right in believing a certain doctrine which another person, equally educated and clear-judging, holds in utter abhorrence? Religion is a mere matter of accident. We are not responsible for our parentage—therefore not for our faith. We are taught in childhood to believe such a creed, to worship such a divinity; we do it. Our minds are plastic clay, and take individual impressions. Are we

responsible for them, or to blame because in after years our intellect rebels at what our duty compelled us to accept? True, the generality of mankind never even think of stepping out of their groove: it is much easier to tread the beaten track than to cut out a new one for ourselves. I have investigated many forms of religion. I can't say I have found any to satisfy me. The Church professes to do a great deal, but I doubt if it has ever done any real or permanent good. All great truths of science and knowledge have been arrived at by man's own dogged resolves, not by any help of ecclesiasticism; rather, indeed, has it been the way of its rulers and directors to shut humanity into complete and unquestioning ignorance. True, we have plenty of freedom now, but that is because thought and reason have been too strong for even priestcraft to combat."

"Your arguments," said Adrian Lyle, "are of course the outcome of minds that are doing their best to overthrow the growth of any faith. But we have drifted far away from our starting point. Can nothing give you a little more content in life as it is, a little more hope in what it may be? The very extent of your discontent is proof that your soul cries out for food that philosophy cannot supply. You refuse your feelings full play. You argue and dissect every sensation that meets you, or that is awakened in you. But, believe me, it is the simple things of life that awaken its purest feelings. A child's faith, a woman's tenderness, an act of self-denial, a deed of unrecognised heroism—these are capable of giving purer happiness, of teaching nobler morality than the cleverest treatise of philosophy, the most perfect form of external religion. I am not good at reasoning. I only know the truth and actuality of certain convictions which have led me to a profession I but imperfectly uphold. That I am the happier for doing so, I frankly confess. I wish——" he added earnestly as he looked at the fair, cold face, "I could make you so."

For a moment she was silent; then looked at him with her coldest and most critical air. "It would not

be possible," she said, "I am one of Nature's mistakes. Nothing will change me."

"Yes," he said suddenly, as he rose from his chair to take leave—"one thing. But I will not wish it you."

"And that one thing?" she questioned, smiling.

"Is a great sorrow," he said, with a gravity that was almost compassionate.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE FALSE SUMMONS.

Adrian Lyle walked slowly and thoughtfully homewards in the light of the June sunset. The memory of Alexis Kenyon lingered with him despite himself. She puzzled, she disturbed, and almost—so he thought—disgusted him. Yet the cruel cynicism, the critical coldness, the audacity and skill of her mind, asserted themselves with a strength he could not deny.

A growing sense of annoyance was present with him as he thought of that conversation, and felt how weak his arguments had been, how wanting in zeal and fervour, and true purpose. That cold face; the little, cruel, insolent smile on those perfect lips; had shattered his weapons for once, had almost made him doubt that the faith he upheld was after all worth living and dying for; that the human soul was as mystical and divine as he had always upheld it to be; that the creed, of which he was a messenger and teacher, was the real and soul-felt truth of a glorious Christianity!

The little sting she had implanted rankled in his breast. He had gone to her full of purpose, and with a cause to plead. How tame, and spiritless, and foolish it all looked now!

It was the man, not the priest, who confronted him, who walked side by side with him through the golden shades of the avenue—the man in his weakness, his

imperfections, his vain yearnings, his struggles after that perfection which it is not in mortal to attain. Past years of frenzied doubt and eager research rushed back to his memory; days when the divinity of heaven had been unrealisable—an abstraction, to which his mental powers could give no shape, and in which his soul could take no comfort. He had thought that such doubts were past, such dark hours ended; and yet a look, a word, had recalled them to life. He felt that there was neither grace, nor loveliness, nor consolation in such a mind as Alexis Kenyon's, and yet it held a power that combated his own, and turned his noblest aspirations into myths and dreams.

"How much harm a woman like that can do!" he thought to himself; "making life a mockery of every pure and noble thing, its best efforts futile, its ideals purposeless, its ambitions insignificant. She would turn even prayer to ridicule—and call the soul's agony a useless waste of feeling and energy, as futile as the cry of a child in the dark to some unknown Power that cares nothing for its sufferings!"

And yet, with all these memories of her, he could not but acknowledge how dangerously fascinating she was; how fatally possible it might be for her to hold, and control, and subjugate a man's life, crushing with careless feet whatever lay in her path; putting aside with that small, white, cruel hand, another claim, another influence that rashly combated her own. And, as he thought of this, he remembered Gretchen.

Was it possible that Neale Kenyon—weak, wavering, unstable as he knew him to be—could safely brave the tempting and the influence of such a woman? True, he did not seem to care for her. There was more of dread than attraction in their present relationship—at least on the young fellow's own part; but if she chose——"

His thoughts ceased at that point; ceased with a sharp and sudden dread of pursuing the subject which haunted him so often and so persistently. He became suddenly conscious that he was not alone; that he was looking at some one or something that brought back a sharp and subtle memory.

Abruptly he paused, lifting eyes and face to the level of another.

Léon Bari stood before him, under the shadows of the drooping boughs.

Adrian Lyle's first impulse was to move aside and pass; but something in the man's face compelled him, against his will, to stand still, as he was standing.

"Do you wish to speak to me?" he asked abruptly, as Bari removed his hat with ostentatious politeness.

"If Monsieur will pardon the liberty," answered the man suavely.

"I am at your service," said the young clergyman coldly.

Bari looked furtively at the pale, grave face.

"I believe, Monsieur," he said, "that I am not mistaken in supposing you would do a service for a lady, especially one who is sick and suffering. I have a message for you from one, and one in whom I think you are somewhat interested."

"Perhaps," said Adrian Lyle, impatiently, "you would come to the point, it would save time."

The man bowed.

"Certainly, Monsieur," he said. "The message is from Mrs. Kenyon."

Adrian Lyle started; his face flushed stormily.

"Mrs. Kenyon——" he faltered, "what does she want with me?"

"Your ministration, perhaps," said Bari, with a scarcely-perceptible sneer. "I am not commissioned to say more."

"But," said Adrian Lyle suspiciously, "why does she send me a message through you? Where is her husband?"

"Mr. Kenyon," said Bari, "is in London. He is very busy. There is great excitement there. It is not unlikely he may have to rejoin his regiment in India almost immediately."

"And she — Mrs. Kenyon — is she in London also?"

"No. She is at Leawoods, in Hants. Mr. Kenyon took a small house there for her."

"And you say she is ill—and wants to see me?" pursued Adrian Lyle in a troubled voice, as that old promise recurred to his mind.

"That is what I am commissioned to tell Monsieur. Mr. Kenyon also bade me use all haste."

"Of course I will come," said Adrian Lyle, "if she needs me. But if she is ill, she requires a doctor."

"Doubtless Mr. Kenyon has seen to that," said Bari. "He despatched me here with that message to you. Probably," he added—as if it were an afterthought—"Madame has some idea of changing her religion. When ladies are ill they are often fanciful, and she has spoken of it often."

"Give me the address," said Adrian Lyle coldly.

He felt the old distrust, the old dislike, to this man increasing every moment. It seemed so odd, so mysterious, that he shonld be summoned in this fashion to Gretchen, unless—and his heart seemed to stand still with sudden terror at the thought—unless, indeed, she was in danger.

The fear seemed to chill his blood to ice. That beautiful, girlish, passionate creature in the hands of life's common foe! And yet it might be. Lives as young, as innocent, as fair as hers had been culled by the grim Reaper with his cruel sickle again and again, even in his experience. There was no rule by which to limit the power or the decrees of Death.

He took the paper from Bari's hand, and hurried on down the length of the beech avenue, deaf and blind to everything around. Gretchen ill! Gretchen in danger! Gretchen needing him! That was all he could think of.

The mastering power of sudden emotion swept all other memories away. He forgot Alexis Kenyon; he forgot his duties in the parish; almost, he forgot Neale. When calmness in some measure returued, he went up to the Rectory to ask for the necessary leave of absence. The Rector, stout, rubicund, easy-going,

enjoying a nap in his study-chair, listened to his Curate's demand and explanation with ill-concealed annoyance.

It meant additional duty for himself; it meant the laboured composition of two sermons instead of one; it meant disturbance and vexation at the present moment; and the Rector was sharp and ill-tempered in his response to the request.

"Impossible!" he said, "impossible!"

Adrian Lyle gently but firmly insisted that the summons was imperative; that, in fact, he must obey it at any risk or sacrifice.

The Rector knew the value of his young assistant well enough to consider a quarrel impolitic; but his grudging and hard-won assent sent Adrian Lyle home in a state of mind the reverse of comfortable. Still, he told himself, he must go, and an hour later he set out for his destination.

The journey was one across country, necessitating many changes and many vexatious delays. It was long past midnight when he arrived at the station named in his directions. It was a little, damp, out-of-the-way place, in charge of a single sleepy porter, who told him that his destination was five miles off; that no conveyance was possible; and that the one small inn of the village would probably be closed.

The information was not inspiriting; but Adrian Lyle set out to walk the distance, taking his bag in his hand.

The night had fallen dark and cloudy. But he had no difficulty in making out the road, as it ran like a white, curving line between the hedgerows.

The odours of honeysuckle and wild flowers greeted him pleasantly after the hot and dusty journey. He took off his hat and bared his head to the night wind, and, for the first time since he had left Medehurst, a sense of rest and peace stole over his troubled senses, and calmed the fever in his veins.

"It will be too late to go to her now," he thought to himself. "I will wait till morning."

Yet, even as he said the words, a strange desire seized him to see where she lived, to look at the lights

in her window, where, perhaps, some watcher waited for the dawn as anxiously as he himself.

He felt certain that Kenyon must be there. The place was near enough to London for him to run down by the last train and return by the first; and surely, in this hour of a young wife's first illness, her husband would be by her side.

Mile after mile he walked steadily on, passing now and then a farm-house, or a cottage. He came at last to a place where two roads met.

He paused then. A sudden flush rose to his face. One of these roads led to the village, the other would take him to the little house called "The Laurels," where he had been told that Gretchen lived.

Usually so decided and self-sufficient, it struck Adrian Lyle as strange that he could not at once make up his mind to pass on, and continue his way to the village inn. A sort of longing, a restless desire to see this house of Gretchen's, took possession of him. He tried to combat it, but it was too strong even for his strength.

Against his will, against his reason, had been the attraction that had drawn him to Gretchen's side in those dreamy, fateful hours in the old Italian cities. Against his will and against his reason now, was the longing that drew him towards her dwelling-place on this fatal night in June.

He took the road which turned aside from the village. It plunged into darkness and depths of shade, narrowing at last into a mere lane beneath the thick-leaved, overhanging trees.

He walked on, his footsteps making a faint echo in the silence—a silence which held the brooding, mysterious hush of a coming storm.

For about half-a-mile the lane extended, then it came to an abrupt stop, seemingly at a thick and impenetrable hedge of laurels which stood breast-high like a rampart, and afforded no glimpse of anything beyond.

In vain Adrian Lyle's eyes searched for gate or entrance. He could see nothing. While he stood

there doubtful and hesitating, a long low roll of muttered thunder broke the stillness, and a vivid flash of lightning followed. The trees around trembled and shook. A cold faint wind swept across his cheek, and moaned amidst the rustling boughs which formed so thick a canopy. That momentary flash, however, had shown Adrian Lyle a small iron gate at a short distance from where he stood, set back in the deep hedge of shrubs. Involuntarily he stepped towards it, and laid his hand upon the latch. It yielded to his touch. Before a second flash had rent the darkness, he was on the inside of the gate, and treading a narrow and gravelled path that wound its way among a maze of vegetation, which it was too dark to distinguish. He paused and looked up. The hurrying clouds showed a faint gleam of moonlight that was again eclipsed by darkness. The moaning wind took a louder and more threatening tone, and for an instant the thought crossed Adrian Lyle's mind that it would be wiser for him to make his way to the village, before the storm broke out in all its fury.

But as he wavered, another flash, more brilliant than any of its predecessors, showed him a small low house fronting him at but a short distance, and as he moved forward he caught the glimmer of a light in one of the upper windows. For an instant his heart seemed to stand still; then it leaped from frozen silence into life and warmth, and sent forth its eager longings into an involuntary prayer—a prayer for the young fair life, which even now might be fighting with danger, or with death.

As in fervid words that petition took flight amidst the storm and darkness all around him, the window above was suddenly opened, and a figure stood revealed there, thrown into strong relief by the light within the chamber.

Adrian Lyle saw it and stood transfixed as if to stone. The loose white draperies, the long floating hair, the lovely face looking down at his own, and clearly recognisable even in the gloom, all came to him as a revelation of past joys and past memories.

Ill—dying—who had told him so? Who had led him here on this fool's errand?

Again the lightning leaped out from the dark horizon line, and in showing him the figure at the window with yet more dazzling clearness, revealed to her his own standing motionless below.

She leant suddenly forward; she thrust out eager face and arms from the jasmine and the roses that framed her lattice. "Neale," she cried low and soft, as if half afraid of her own hope, "Neale, is it you?"

Then a great flood of crimson rushed to Adrian Lyle's face, scorching him with hot and savage shame, and his pulses beat like hammers as he thought how he had been tricked and fooled.

"It is not Neale," he cried stormily. "It is I—Adrian Lyle! Did you not send for me?"

She sprang to her feet. All the glow and fire of her eyes turned to sudden dread.

"Mr. Lyle," she faltered. "You—at this hour What does it mean?"

"You—you did not send for me——?" he repeated stupidly.

"No," she answered, amazed at the question. "Why should I send for you? I did not know you were even in England. Indeed"—and she laughed a little—"I think I had forgotten all about you; though, when you spoke——"

He put out his hand as if to ward off a blow. His brain seemed dizzy, and a sudden calm fell over his excited feelings.

"There has been some mistake," he said, "some grave error. I—I will call in the morning and explain. I heard you were ill—dying——"

"I, ill!" she exclaimed. "I was never better in my life. Who could have told you such a thing?"

"It must have been a mistake," Adrian Lyle repeated in the same dazed way. "I—I am very sorry."

"But I can't understand," the girl said impatiently. "It is very odd. Where are you going?" she cried out suddenly, as she saw him moving away.

He gave no answer. At the same moment another

crash of thunder shook the width of the dark heavens, rolling and reverberating like a cannonade over the country round. The girl gave a faint, low cry of terror, and started back a pace. The lightning once again lit up the gloomy darkness, and as she clasped her shuddering hands in momentary terror, she saw a dark mass separate itself from the writhing, tossing branches that the wind had seized with giant force; separate, and sway forwards, and then fall with a dull, loud crash upon the ground.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### IN THE STORM.

A MOMENT later the storm descended in all its fury. The wind no longer moaned, but howled like a legion of demons. The trees around the little cottage writhed and tossed, and flung out threatening arms at one another, and shook their beautiful leaves down on the sodden earth as if in very impotence of senseless fury.

The rain streamed down in one terrific torrent, amidst which the lightning flashed and played like vivid flame. It was a terrible scene; and Gretchen, hurriedly closing her window, sat there trembling and aghast.

"Oh! why would he not wait?" she asked herself again and again, picturing that lonely figure on the dark, unsheltered road, amid the warring elements. "And who could have told him to come here? How cruel! how shameful! How angry Neale will be!"

The magic of that name for a moment swayed her with the old resistless mastery. Almost unconsciously she sank down on her knees beside the bed, and buried her face in the soft white coverlid.

"Oh, love! why are you not here?" her heart cried out as the tempest rioted without. "Can't you *feel* I want you?"

But the solitude was unanswering, the quiet of the room was undisturbed by step or shadow; though, indeed, it seemed to the girl that the passionate call and crave of her heart must surely bridge the abyss of space and time, and echo at the doors of that other heart to which she had appealed.

She had been alone a long time now—long, at least, to one who measured time by the absence of the only being who made time endurable.

It seemed as if months, instead of weeks, had passed since she had come to this little quiet nook, buried from sight and sound of the outer world. The days had been spent among books, or in rambles through the lonely lanes and quiet meadows. Her only comfort had been Neale's letters, and they were neither so frequent nor so long as she could have desired.

Till to-night, when Adrian Lyle's presence had broken in on her solitude, she had been as lonely and as undisturbed as the Sleeping Princess of immortal fame. Each morning, when she rose, she told herself, "He will be here to-day!" and each evening, as her eyes closed in slumbers that were too light and too dream-filled for rest, she would murmur, "To-morrow; surely he will come to-morrow."

She knelt there now for long, listening half in terror to the raging storm, yet loyally seeing in it both fair and good excuse for that deferred presence which, to her, embodied all that was loved and valued in life.

The storm at last began to abate its violence. The rain fell in slow, plashing drops; the wind died away with long, low moans; the thunder no longer crashed and rolled through the black vaults above; and the lightning only played fitfully and irregularly along the brightening line that already spoke of dawn.

Gretchen rose to her feet at last; she felt that sleep was impossible. She went to her window and drew up the blind, and looked out on the devastated garden. As she looked, a faint pale gleam lit up the eastern sky, and slowly spread itself along the heavy banks of clouds.

Her eyes turned to that gleam, joyful that it meant another dawn, yet heavy with the shadows of memory such as daylight always brought her.

She remembered that sunrise in Venice—all its wonder and its glory, and the rapture of that other presence that had watched it by her side.

And one other morning she thought of now—when they had passed through Vienna on their return journey. They were to leave by the early train, and she had risen at six o'clock to have a peep at the wonderful city, which as yet was unknown and marvellous as a child's dream to her vivid fancy.

How it all came back: the sumptuous room; the bare polished floor over which she had moved with rosy, naked feet! She seemed to see herself creeping, eager and curious as a child, to the lace-enshrouded window and opening it, and looking out on the street below that was all damp and cool from the passage of the water-carts. She could recall the very look of the opposite houses, with their jealously-closed shutters; even the café, where a waiter was lazily opening doors and windows, and yawning vigorously over the performance. A cloud of pigeons were fluttering amidst eaves and nooks formed by balconies and arches. It seemed to her she heard their soft coos, the movement of their rustling wings; and all the golden light and glory of the day swept once more over her senses and made her heart thrill at the remembrance of her own great happiness.

Then, the story of her life had just begun. Now, it had gathered pages instead of lines; it held pictures, scenes, incidents, she never wearied of recalling.

As she stood by the open window the scents of the jasmine and roses touched her senses with a subtle pain for which she could not account. The dark, dreamy eyes grew wistful; a little shiver shook her slender frame. Then, quite suddenly, she saw the light spread glowing and glorious over all the dim gray sky. She heard a flutter of wings, a chirp of waking birds, and half-unconsciously her glance fell earthwards, and in its wanderings rested with a sudden startled wonder on the fallen trunk of a huge

tree, which only the night before had towered in lofty grandeur among its compeers.

There it lay now—broken, bruised; its leaves soddened, its boughs cracked and bare; a melancholy and forlorn thing in the brightness and glory of the awakening day. Pityingly and regretfully the girl's eyes rested on it, and as their scrutiny grew more intense it seemed to her that something else lay there amidst that entangling mass of leaves and broken boughs. Involuntarily she leant forwards, shading her eyes from the now vivid glow of sunlight, painfully conscious of a terrible fear, which robbed her cheeks of colour and filled her heart with an intense and inexplicable dread.

A moment more and she had left the window, and thrust her feet into slippers, and flung a warm and heavy cloak over her white draperies.

Then swift as thought she flew down the stairs, and opened the door, and so crossing with a lapwing's speed the intervening space, found herself leaning, terrified and helpless, over the prostrate figure of a man.

As the horror slowly passed from her eyes, she saw—who—it was. She remembered, with piteous and bewildered self-reproach, the crash that had mingled with the thunder. The huge tree had struck him as his hand was on the gate. She saw the dreadful gash on the uncovered head, the blood that lay in a pool beneath it.

So still, so gray, looked the face upturned there with closed eyes, in the light and glory of the June dawn, that she fancied he was dead, and in her terror screamed aloud the word, and rushed back to the house to awake the sleeping servants.

The gardener was the first who heard her cry, and followed her with all speed to the spot. It was a task of no small difficulty to clear away the heavy boughs and branches from round and about that helpless figure. Then he tried to lift it, but in vain.

"He be powerful heavy," he said, scratching his head and looking helplessly at Gretchen. "Maybe I'd better go for help?"

"Yes, go, go!" cried the girl frantically, as she tried to stanch the terrible wound, and looked with ever-growing dread at the pallid, hueless face. "And send some one to the village for the doctor. He is not dead. I can feel his heart beat. Only, for Heaven's sake, make haste."

She supported the head against her knees, scarce knowing how she did it. It was so terrible, to think that all those hours he had been lying here so close to her, bleeding slowly to death, and she—unconscious of it all!

She raised one hand, but it dropped heavily back, yet she saw the pale lips suddenly quiver, and the eyes unclose. One fleeting glance, betraying no consciousness, giving no recognition, and again Adrian Lyle relapsed into insensibility.

She wetted his cold brow with the rain-water, she chafed his hands in her own small trembling palms, but he gave no sign of awaking.

Never had sound of human steps seemed so welcome to the girl as when she caught the echo of old Job's, and those of the labourer he had brought with him from a neighbouring field. Between them they managed to lift the unconscious man, and bore him into the cottage, and laid him down on the bed which Gretchen had ordered the woman to prepare.

She made old Job and his wife remove the wet and soaking clothes, and wrap the cold and pulseless limbs in hot blankets. She herself prepared hot wine, and tried to pour it through the clenched teeth; but it was useless.

It seemed long, long hours before the village doctor came. Fortunately he was a clever and also a reticent man. He asked but few questions; the case explained itself. Concussion of the brain—in all probability to be followed by rheumatic fever, after those long hours of exposure and loss of blood.

"It will be very serious," he said, glancing from the unconscious man to the lovely terror-stricken face of the watcher. "I had better send you a nurse."

"No—please do not," pleaded Gretchen in her imperfect English. "I am strong and young. I can do all that is necessary, with the assistance of my servant."

"As you please, madam," said the doctor gruffly. "Only, when matters grow critical, you will find it is impossible. Is the gentleman a friend of yours?"

"Yes," said the girl. "At least, I met him abroad some months ago—that is all."

The doctor looked sharply at her. There was some mystery, he knew, about the lady at The Laurels. He saw how lovely she was, and how young. He noted the circlet on her slender finger, and thought he must be a strange husband who would care to leave so young and fair a wife to the solitude which he knew had been her portion.

"Perhaps," he said doubtfully, "you had better communicate with the gentleman's friends. Do you know his address?"

"No," said Gretchen. "I have no idea of it."

"You had better search his pockets, then. There may be a letter or card in them to give the information. At present I can do nothing more. I will return again this evening."

He went away, leaving Gretchen more helpless and miserable than she had ever felt.

The mystery of Adrian Lyle's presence here was inexplicable. She knew that no one save Neale could give her his address; and Mr. Lyle had said he had been told she had sent for him—that she was ill almost to death.

The search in his pockets produced nothing, save a little worn pocket Testament, which never left his possession. His bag, which old Job had discovered close by the gate, contained only a change of linen. There was not a scrap of paper even, to give any clue to where he had come from, or how he had discovered Gretchen's retreat.

As the hours wore on he became delirious, and the girl grew really alarmed.

"I must write to Neale," she thought, "and tell him to come at once."

She left the sick-room, and went downstairs and into the little parlour that was all embowered in roses and bright with sunshine. Yet something about it struck cold and chill on her senses, and she felt a vague terror of its intense loneliness.

She sat down at the little table, and drew paper and pens slowly before her. To write to Neale was always a labour of love. Why, then, this sudden and unsurmountable dread?

Hurriedly she began to trace the first few words. English seemed easier to her to write than to speak. She had penned but some half-dozen lines, when the sound of a step without made her lift her head and look eagerly out of the window.

It was the postman she had heard. He was close to her, and with a sudden impulse she leant out of the window and asked for the letters. He handed her one. A lovely flush of colour dyed her cheeks; her eyes glowed like stars. It was from him—her love—her idol—her beloved. With a sudden rush of pulses, with a heart of flame, she tore the cover asunder and seized upon the words with devouring eyes.

One moment—two—three—then the colour faded to deadly white, the leaping pulses beat with heavy, stony throbs.

"Gone away!" the pale lips murmured. "Gone away! . Not one farewell look, or word, or kiss. Gone—away!"

Her eyes in all their agony of appeal met only those cold written words; saw only as an insult to her passionate love the filmy slip of paper enclosed. Then, with one exceeding bitter cry, she threw herself face downwards on the floor, the letter crushed in her hand; her whole frame racked by sobs that threatened to suffocate her as they tore her breast and broke from her quivering lips.

He had gone! He had left her! That was all she could remember. Not a thousand explanations or excuses could soften the cruelty of those words. After these lonely weeks—these long, dull days, when her every thought had been of him, he could calmly depart for some far-off land without sparing her one hour to

say farewell. All her watching, her prayers, her longings, seemed flung back on her now as things useless and undesired. She would have walked barefoot a hundred miles to see him, to look once more on the beloved face, to touch the fond lips that had sworn such eternal love to hers; and he—he had not made one effort, nor attempted one sacrifice in order to give her such consolation. All her wealth of love, her patience, her tenderness, had not been powerful enough to draw him to her side, while she——!

Alas! for the wide, wide difference between a man's love and a woman's. What would she not have done, suffered, sacrificed, only to purchase one hour of his presence?

After a time the first passion of her grief spent itself. She rose and shook back her disordered hair, and stumbled with blind, unsteady steps, back to the table where her letter lay. She looked at it as a stranger might have looked. It seemed as if long, long years had passed since, glad and hopeful, she had penned those lines. No need to send them—now.

She took the paper and tore it slowly into shreds. The halo of that sham hallucination with which she had crowned a man's selfish passion faded with each wasted word.

She sickened with pain as she did it, remembering the hopes that were ended, the dreams that were dead. As the last fragment fluttered to her feet she closed the writing-case with resolute hand, then moved slowly away. At the door she turned and looked back, seeming to see the ghost of her girlish self, quivering with love, and life, and hope; the brightest, loveliest thing that that old parlour had ever seen.

So laggard a step, so wan and sad a face, had never belonged to that Gretchen of an hour ago. The thought of that old self and the pity she felt for it, and the utter impossibility that it could ever, ever again come back to her, shook her once more with a tempest of piteous grief.

"Oh—he might have come," she cried, and the tears rushed down her pale cheeks. "He would have come had he loved me as I love him."

The tones of her voice had lost all their soft, rich music. It was as if her very life had been withdrawn from all that nourished and supported it. She was a woman now, a woman who had learnt the meaning of suffering at one stroke. A woman—alas! alas! the pity of it—never more to be a girl glad and gay of heart for very youth and delight of living, and of love, and all youth's passionate blind faith in what was—loved!

That night the doctor spoke seriously of his patient's condition to Gretchen. His keen eye detected that some sorrow or trouble had fallen upon the girl's young life, and he could not but compassionate her present situation.

"My husband has gone abroad to join his regiment," she said, and said it coldly and calmly as one who had been used to such partiugs. "But I am sure it would not be for him to wish his friend removed from here if his condition be so critical as you say. He must remain till he gets stronger. I—and my old servant will do our best for him."

"As you please, madam," said the old man gravely. "But I must tell you it will be a long case."

"That," she said with a little odd gesture, "does make no difference. It will but help me to pass the time."

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## CHAPTER X.

### SOME MORE CAPRICES.

"A TELEGRAM from Neale," said Sir Roy at breakfast, the morning after Adrian Lyle's departure. "Good heavens — off directly to Madras — regiment under orders!"

He threw down the little pink paper, and looked at his daughter in consternation. Her face expressed more relief than surprise.

"It is sudden," she said. "Perhaps you had better go up to town to see him."

"I will," said Sir Roy, who seemed overwhelmed at the news. "Poor boy, how unfortunate!"

"Oh no," said Alexis coolly. "It is as well he should undergo the 'baptism of fire.' He is just one of those happy-go-lucky persons who never come to grief."

But Sir Roy, who saw danger threatening his pet scheme, was by no means comfortable.

"Won't you come up, too?" he urged. "The poor boy can't get away to see us—we ought surely to go to him."

"I hate parting scenes," said Alexis coldly. "I should be expected to weep, and you know I never do —in public. Perhaps there would be others going to see the troops off. Melodramatic display, crying women, squalling babies, untuneful bands, noise, turmoil, emotion, all joined with the smell of tar and oil, and dirty ropes, and heaving water—all things I detest. No, I think I will not go. You can make him my farewells. We are neither of us impassioned lovers, as you know."

Sir Roy was silent. He looked and felt disturbed, but he knew better than to waste arguments or persuasions on his daughter. Perhaps if he acquiesced with her, she would go. It was more than probable.

However, Alexis had no intention of going. She ordered and arranged everything for her father, and was almost affectionate to him in her farewells; but she in no way changed her first decision, and Sir Roy took the early train to London in solitary glory.

Having seen him off, Alexis went to her room, and had herself dressed for church in an exquisite costume of pale gray.

She sent Lady Brereford a message desiring to know if she cared to accompany her, and was conscious of a feeling of relief when she received an answer in the negative.

The bells had just ceased ringing as she drove up to the door, and many eyes turned towards that beautiful figure sweeping in indolent grace up the

aisle to the Abbey pew. Though her head was bent down in unaccustomed humility, yet Alexis Kenyon caught the flutter of white robes, and was dimly and almost angrily conscious of an answering tremor in her own heart. The knowledge of anything so unusual and so uncalled-for, roused all her pride and coldness, nor did she attempt to lift her eyes to where the figures of the Rector and Curate were standing. But when a strange voice fell on her ear, she could not help one quick glance at the reading-desk. The Rector was in his accustomed place, but a stranger stood where Adrian Lyle was wont to stand, and a feeling of disappointment at an unverified expectation crept into Alexis Kenyon's heart as she noted the fact.

It was swept away immediately by a tide of angry shame. Why should she care who conducted the service? Why should it matter to her if that grave face, and that brow of power and thought, were not at hand for her scornful eyes to criticise?

All the same, the service seemed to her a more meaningless form even than usual. The Rector's oily voice and safely-grounded platitudes irritated her nerves to an almost unbearable degree.

Despite these facts, however, she waited in her carriage till the reverend gentleman came out from the vestry, unsurpliced and stole-less, his ordinary, comfortable-looking self, and graciously invited him to lunch at the Abbey.

The invitation was immediately accepted, despite the fact that the strange Curate, who had been hurriedly telegraphed for, would have to take his cold lamb and claret in the solitude of the Rectory parlour, and under the supervision of the Rectory housekeeper.

Alexis Kenyon leant haughtily and negligently back on her luxurious cushions, listening to the old man's unctuous talk, and wondering whether he would see fit to mention the cause of Adrian Lyle's absence.

He did at last, in the form of a complaint, and as a disturbance to his own comfort and convenience.

Alexis listened with her coldest air; but in her

heart she wondered from whom the mysterious summons had come. He had told her once that he had no relatives, and very few friends. Yet something very urgent must have caused him to risk offending the Rector, and neglecting his duties.

The growing consciousness that his absence disturbed her, that the cause of it had even been the reason of her present boredom, was sufficient reason for Alexis Kenyon to be all that was most capricious, languid, and disdainful during the luncheon, and indeed for the rest of the afternoon.

She tried Lady Breresford's temper so severely that that usually amiable dowager retreated as speedily as possible to the solitude of her own pretty boudoir. The men seemed amused, and Fay laughed and put it down to the effects of church-going; but Alexis herself knew well enough the reason, though she disdained to acknowledge it.

They had tea on the lawn about five o'clock, after which the Rector took a prosy farewell, and was driven back to the comfortable Rectory and the neglected Curate.

Alexis went within and wrote two letters: one was to Neale, bidding him a cool and not very regretful farewell; the other, to a lady in London, who had told her she was in want of a governess.

"I have heard of an excellent one," wrote the girl. "Well educated, refined, capable in every way. She is very poor. I will be her reference if you will take her at once, as I know she is in very straitened circumstances. It is not often I ask a favour of any one; but I do ask this of you, and only beg you to keep my name secret in the matter."

The letters sealed and addressed, she felt more at ease. She did not know the person on whose behalf she had interested herself. In all probability, she would never even see her; but all the same she wished to help her to the independence she sought, just because no one would believe she had ever given the matter another thought.

"He said I had made quite a fine art of selfishness," she told herself, standing there by her window

in the bright June sunset, and gazing down the long winding avenue. "No doubt he is right."

While she stood there the bells began to ring for evening service. She listened to them with a vague impatience and restlessness. How was it that she, to whom all religion had been indifferent, all forms a weariness, should hear those bells as one who hears a tale of pathos and regret; should see old dreams arise, old fancies dying, all things of youth, and hope, and tenderness come back in mournful resurrection? How was it, too, that as their cadence rose and fell on the evening air, they brought the low, rich tones of a remembered voice to her ears—a voice that had dared to tell her the truth of herself, her follies, her arrogance, her selfishness; yet told it in such guise that she recognised its truth with more of shame than anger; that she acknowledged its rebuke with more of meekness than of pride?

There must have been something in Alexis Kenyon's nature not yet utterly obscured by the languor and indolence of fashionable life, and the vanities and adulation of the world she had ruled—something not altogether so cold, so cruel, so purposeless as she would have had men believe—and that something it was that Adrian Lyle's words had stirred from its long and indolent repose, and brought face to face with her once affected incredulity, till she saw herself as he saw her, and felt bitterly ashamed of the picture.

Slowly, sweetly, the bells rang on, over woods and meadows golden in the sunlight; over quiet homes and pastures, and all the simple, homely things of country life. And the mistress of all these wide domains stood there in the rosy glow of the evening light, gazing on it all with eyes too weary for tears, with a heart too bitter for peace; and ever and always before her, and looking back to her own, there rose a face whose grave rebuke stung her to the quick; whose pity and contempt showed her her own egotism in its true light, and swept over her with the force of a merited reproach.

"Why should I care?" she said at last, breaking

that long spell of thought with an impatience that was almost anger. "I never have cared before. Others have blamed me, others have accused me of spoiling their lives, and it never gave me a disturbed hour. What is he but one among many; with a little more force of character perhaps—a little more earnestness of purpose—but that is all? Why should I care? He does not."

Despite herself she felt the colour spring to her face even as the unuttered thought sprang into her mind. Therein lay the sting of her life's first humiliation. One man had dared to resist her, had dared to speak cold, hard, unvarnished truth to her dainty ears.

To her temper, so imperious and arrogant, no slight could have been greater. It moved her to surprise at herself that she could think of Adrian Lyle without bitter wrath and indignation; that the fact of his absence to-day had been able to disturb her serenity and haunt her solitude.

Impetuously she turned away from the window at last, the flush still warm on her cheek that had come with the humiliation of that thought—he does not care!

But would he always keep that serene indifference? Others had tried and failed when she had so willed. Why should this man be different? After all, he was but a man—of a nobler type, certainly, than most she had met; but she had read an ardent and imaginative nature in the flash and fire of the grand gray eyes; had fathomed the power of strong passions held in check by a strong nature, even under the perfect control and gentleness of that perfect manner.

For a moment her face grew warm; her eyes flashed like steel.

"If I could conquer him," she thought. "If I—could!"

It seemed a triumph worthy of all her efforts, stimulating even her languid energies. Would it be possible? She looked at herself and thought it would. But a vague sense of regret and impotence began to war with her usual self-confidence.

There was something base and cowardly in h resolve. She was not free, and he, if he ever care would not lightly forgive or extenuate treachery.

She seemed to see the blaze of wrath and scor that would fill those speaking eyes; she seemed to s her petty vanities shrivel as before a scorching flam when once he should read her purpose, and its pett end.

And yet its tempting allured and drew her on, ar set the current of her thoughts to its turbulent flo To be loved by him; to hold in her hands the misei of that grand and self-sufficient nature! For it wou be only misery she would deal him—a cruel, incessa pain that should force him to remember her eve against his will. The surest way to keep a man memory was to make him unhappy. She had prove that again and again, and it seemed to her in this ho that no triumph would be so sweet as that which shou wring from Adrian Lyle's lips the confession tha despite his strength and his reason, he loved the woma he now despised.

The task would not be easy, but therein lay i chief charm; something that would call forth h energies, her seductions, her thousand sorceries.

A little cruel smile crossed her lips; she caught i reflection in the glass on the opposite wall. "I a afraid I must be really wicked," she thought, as sl looked back at that reflection. "My good momen are only vague regrets and vaguer longings. Wh was it he said was to make me different? 'A gre sorrow.' But a great sorrow can only spring from great love; and where is there place or room for th —in a nature like mine?"

# Book IV.

## CHAPTER I.

### OH, IRONY OF FATE!

A MONTH had passed.

Summer was at its height, and the burden and heat of scorching days and feverish nights, of many anxious hours and fitful hopes, had robbed Gretchen's cheek of its bloom, and her step of its lightness.

Adrian Lyle's illness had been more serious even than she had imagined. Never once had he been fully conscious since that night. She had been able to learn nothing more of his reasons for coming to her; she had not the vaguest idea of where he lived, or what friend might be awaiting news of him.

Her own life was just the same. Since that one brief note from Neale, she had heard no more. The first sharpness of agony had given place to a dull ache which never seemed to leave her. She would lie awake for hours on these long hot nights, staring helplessly at the bright sky, or the stars that glittered above the tall tree tops; hating even the cool pulses of the dawns that once had seemed to hold all possibilities; dreading thought, and dreading sleep; and tortured as all young, passionate, unreasoning lives are tortured, for want of the patience and the stoicism which only such tortures teach. It was not only the pain of absence, but the pain of distrust, that she had to bear. It seemed to fill her life and shadow its merest details.

Senses, desires, memories, were all acute, yet a

blight seemed to cover her once harmless joy, and she grew restless as a caged bird in this pretty, leafy shelter, that had seemed to her once an ideal home.

The old servant noticed how wan and listless she had become, but put it down to the anxiety and care of this long illness. She had refused to have a professional nurse, and took her turns of watching and attendance with rigorous exactitude.

July had followed its sister month, and August had taken its place.

One morning, while the day was yet young, she rose and dressed, and went softly to the sick-room. As she opened the door and looked in, she saw that old Peggy had fallen asleep in her chair at the foot of the bed.

Softly she stole in and went up to where the sick man lay. He was wrapped in slumber—deep, dreamless slumber—the first that had visited his fevered brain for all these weary weeks.

Relieved at such a hopeful sign, the girl moved away to the window and stood there, looking out on that waking world, of which most of us know so little, and care less.

Gretchen both knew and cared. She had always had an intense love for Nature in its every mood and phase. Wearily she leant against the window frame, letting the cool, fresh air blow as it would over her loose, rich hair, and touch with tender caress the wan young face.

The beauty which had been hers—that delicate, intangible beauty of extreme youth, exquisite as the bloom of a peach, the petals of a flower—had been suddenly extinguished. She looked like some beaten-down lily as she stood there in the golden glow of the morning light, every line of the fragile figure betokening weariness, and languor, and pain.

It was to see her thus—to see her standing there in her white gown, and with the sunlight warm on cheek and brow—that Adrian Lyle's eyes first made use of recovered consciousness.

For a moment he thought he was dreaming. Weak as a child; scarce conscious of what he was

doing, or where he was; he tried to raise himself on one feeble elbow, and gently called her name.

She turned at once, and looked with startled eyes at that weird and haggard spectacle of manhood's weakness.

In a second she had crossed the room and was by his side.

"You are better!" she cried eagerly. "Oh, I am so glad—so glad."

He sank helplessly back, dizzy and faint, as with some great shock of joy.

"Why are you—here?" he whispered with effort.

"Hush," she said. "Do not speak. You are still so weak and ill. Oh, but it is good that you should know me at last! But I must not let you talk or you will be ill again, and," nodding her pretty head gravely, "I do not want to nurse you all over once more."

She held some cordial to his lips, and he drank it unresistingly, then his eyes closed for very weariness, but he could not sleep with that unanswered wonder in his brain. "Tell me," he urged faintly, "where I am? I will promise to ask nothing more."

"You are with—me," she said softly, "in my own house. You came to see me—do you not remember?—on the night of the storm. You would not stay, and I think as you went out of the gate the lightning struck that great tree beside it, and one branch struck you. You lay there all night—and I never knew. Oh," clasping her small hands eagerly, "if only I had known! But in the morning I found you, and you have been here ever since. And now you are going to get well, and reward me for all my anxiety, are you not? For indeed I was very, very anxious."

"And how long ago," he asked faintly, "was that storm?"

"It must be nearly a month," she said thoughtfully. "And now please do not talk. If you will only try to sleep, that will be so good for you."

He felt the touch of the little hand on his brow; he felt her smooth the pillows; the scent of the rose at her throat seemed to his sick fancy sweet as no

earthly flower had ever been; and then a great peace and calm stole over him, and he fell asleep in unutterable content, and so slept on till noon was well past.

The crisis was over. The fever had left him—spent, exhausted, weaker than any year-old child, it is true, but still safe, and with steps set towards that first stage of convalescence which means so much after weeks of pain and dread.

Gradually, as that first day lapsed into other days, and he gained strength and memory with each, he remembered that no account of his strange absence had reached his Rector, and besought Gretchen to write and inform him of the accident. She wrote the letter at his dictation and sitting by his side, and it was while watching her at the task that Adrian Lyle first noticed some strange, indefinable change in her face. It struck so coldly, so suddenly, that he lost the thread of what he was saying, and remained gazing at her with something of horror in his startled eyes. Wondering at his silence she looked up, and met that strange, questioning glance.

"What is it?" she asked, frightened at some revelation that set her pulses leaping in an odd, nervous fashion which had come to her of late.

"You," he said hurriedly; "are you ill? have you been ill? There is—I am sure there is—something."

A little faint flush rose to her cheek. She did not speak immediately, but as she raised her hand to push back a stray lock of hair, the loose, white sleeve fell back, and he saw how painfully slender it looked—how clearly the delicate tracery of veins showed through the transparent skin.

I am quite well," she said almost impatiently, "only the heat makes me tired. Please go on."

He continued dictating. But that vague uneasiness could not be stilled. He grew restless and ill at ease. As yet he had not had courage to ask news of Neale Kenyon; but he summoned resolution now, and put the question abruptly, almost roughly, as she stood a little apart sealing and stamping the concluded letter.

Her face grew cold and pale; she bent it hurriedly down over the envelope. "Do you not know?" she said. "I thought he must have told you. He has gone to the war!"

"The war!" echoed Adrian Lyle stupidly. "What war?"

"There is war," she said, "in some part of India. His regiment was ordered there, and he has gone. Did he not tell you?" she repeated.

"No," said Adrian Lyle. "It must have been very sudden."

"It was," she said, trying nard to control her agitation. After a moment or two she turned her face to him. "You have never told me," she said, "how you found me here that night; you said you had heard I was ill, and had sent for you, but that was not true. Neale could not have told you—that."

"No," said Adrian Lyle, "it was not Neale; it was Bari."

"Bari!" she cried, pale and startled. "He—he has never been here. How could he say what was so false?"

"I cannot tell," said Adrian Lyle, his brow growing stormy. "It was an infamous lie. I suppose he had some object. But I cannot fathom it at present."

"Nor I," she said. "You must have thought it very strange."

"At first, yes; but he led me to believe that you were unsettled about religious matters, that you wanted counsel and assistance."

"I have wanted that often," she said sadly; "but I should not have troubled you, though I believe in your friendship. And to think," she added indignantly "that you have undergone all this suffering and danger for the sake of Bari's falsehoods. What could have been his object?"

"I cannot tell," said Adrian Lyle; "but I will find out," he added determinedly. "I will find out!"

Then, for the first time, something like awkwardness and embarrassment took possession of him. He was lying here helpless and ill. Kenyon was away. Yet, in his absence he had been lured to his wife's

side by a false message. What did it mean? He moved restlessly on his pillows.

"I shall soon be able to relieve you of the burden of my presence," he said. "I cannot tell you how grieved I am to think of all the trouble and annoyance I must have occasioned."

"Indeed, no!" she said simply. "It was so much my own fault. I should not have allowed you to leave in such a storm. But you hurried away so quickly—and I was so surprised——"

"You must have been," he said bitterly. "More especially as you had forgotten my very existence—so you were frank enough to tell me."

"Ah, yes," she said penitently, "that was not a polite welcome, was it? But I was too startled to think of what I said."

"I hope," Adrian Lyle murmured gently, "that you will always speak the truth to me without regard to politeness. I can't bear to think of you as anything but perfectly frank."

"I always am that," she said, "to you."

She put the letter down and seated herself on the low chair by his bed.

"Shall I read to you?" she said; "there is still an hour before tea."

"I think," he answered, "I would rather talk—if you do not mind."

"Oh no," she said, putting the book on the table beside her, "if you are strong enough."

"I am certainly that," he said with a faint smile. "For I must leave you to-morrow, or next day"

She looked up startled and pained.

"Leave!" she cried. "Oh, that would be foolish, indeed. You would only make yourself ill again. You are far too weak to move."

"I can be taken to the inn in the village," he said resolutely. "I have asked the doctor to let me go there."

"The inn!" faltered the girl. "But why will you not stop here? I can take as good care of you as the people at the inn. It is only a poor, rough place."

"It will do," he said resolutely. "Oh, cannot you

understand? It is not fitting I should stay under your roof, while your husband is away."

She looked up at him pale and startled.

"Why should he mind?" she asked. "You are his friend too!"

"Perhaps," said Adrian Lyle coldly. "But you must allow me to judge what is best and fitting. You are young, and innocent, and unworldly——"

"I feel old enough," she said wistfully, as he paused.

His eyes turned yearningly and regretfully to her face. It was changed, most sadly changed, though as lovely in its pallor and delicacy as ever he had deemed it in its bright, fresh youth. She leant forward a little, and clasped her hands upon her knees.

"I am so lonely," she said; "do not go."

It seemed to Adrian Lyle that, often as that formula, "lead us not into temptation," had been on his lips, he had never fully understood its meaning till this moment.

The swift beating of his heart almost stifled him; the stillness of the room; the faint scents of the roses in her dress; the face itself looking back to his own with such beseeching eyes—all seemed like part of some strange dream. But there was pain in the dream—pain, real, and acute, and hard to bear in this hour of physical weakness.

He dared not look at her. He wondered if she heard those slow, heavy throbs that beat like hammers in his brain. How could she be so unconscious and—he—so overpowered!

She spoke again, and a little pale effort at a smile touched her lips.

"I know you are resolute and hard to move, and my powers to persuade you are so feeble; but when one is all alone, and has no friend anywhere, it seems hard to look forward to——"

Then her voice broke. He saw great tears gather in her eyes; her lips quivered like a child's.

"Oh," she cried piteously, "I must tell you, or my heart will break. I have no one—no one. And Neale has gone so far, and will be away so long. It

is terrible to be alone as I am alone. And he says I must stay here till he returns. Oh, Mr. Lyle, would he—would he be very angry if I went to him?"

"Went to—him!" echoed Adrian Lyle. "My poor child, it would be madness. You could not reach him. Besides, it is not allowable for officers to have their wives with them when they are on active service. You would only make Kenyon doubly anxious. Did he not explain all this to you?"

"I did not see him," she faltered slowly.

Adrian Lyle started.

"Do you mean to say that he did not come here to bid you good-bye?"

She shook her head.

"There was no time," she said loyally. "It was all so sudden."

He looked at the altered face; the bent head; the slight, fragile young figure. Well enough he read the secret of their change now; and that change added the bitterness of another burden to his heavy heart.

"Poor child!" he said pityingly; "poor child!"

"Oh—don't," she cried quickly, "don't pity me. I can't bear it. It—it has been very hard; but I was getting over it. I think having you to nurse and think of helped me. And if only it were not so—so lonely——"

There was a pause which seemed to Adrian Lyle to hold a lifetime of silence. Thoughts, vague, wild, confused, whirled through his brain; the brain that was still weak and dizzy from the shock of that terrible illness. She was lonely, sad, in trouble; she needed a friend; and he was so great a coward that he dared not trust himself in her presence, dared not shelter beneath the same roof. He felt he could cry shame on himself; but he was so weak now, and so unhappy, that he could have turned his face to the wall and wept like a woman. The effort would cost him hours of after suffering; but he made it nobly and heroically, speaking to her as he would have spoken to a grieving child; for what was she but a child still?

"You must try," he said, "to be patient and brave; it is the duty of a soldier's wife. After all, it will be best for a few months, at most, this parting. To follow Kenyon would be impossible. Had it been otherwise, you may be sure he would have done his best to take you with him. The separation must be just as hard for him as for yourself."

She swayed towards him with a little unconscious movement.

"Oh," she said simply, "how kind you are! The very tone of your voice holds comfort. No doubt you are right. It was not his fault, and I ought not to have blamed him; but it did seem hard just at first."

"Did you blame him in your heart?" asked Adrian Lyle, with a faint, sad smile. "I fancy you only imagined you did."

"Yes—it hurt me," she said, her voice a little tremulous. "Written words sound so cold, and I had not seen him for so long."

"Did you know he was at Medehurst Abbey?" asked Adrian Lyle.

"No," she said in surprise. "He only said he was going to London when he left me here, and his letters were from London. Who lives at Medehurst Abbey?"

"His uncle and cousin," said Adrian Lyle. "Do you mean to say he has never told you of them?"

"No," she said. "I knew he had some relations. He said it was duty for him to go and see them. I do not know their names. Is the cousin a lady?" she asked with sudden curiosity.

"Yes," answered Adrian Lyle.

"And—and young, and beautiful," she went on, gazing at him with sudden interest.

"Men say so," he answered indifferently. "Your husband does not think so. I believe he rather dislikes her."

For a moment she was silent, her eyes on the circlet of gold which she was absently turning round and round on her slender finger.

Adrian Lyle watched her, reading plainly enough the trouble in the passionate young heart.

"She is too young for that sting to pierce her heart," he thought. "What has chilled that beautiful faith, I wonder?"

"How did you know her?" she asked presently.

"How?" Adrian Lyle started. His thoughts had been far away. "Oh, you mean Miss Kenyon. I am living close to the Abbey. I am curate at Medehurst Church."

"And Neale was there—staying there?" she persisted.

"Yes. That was where I met him for the first time since we parted in Rome."

"Ah," she sighed, "dear Rome, how beautiful it was!" Then her eyes drooped, her voice grew softer and more wistful. "Do you remember," she asked, "that day in the Pantheon, and all you said?"

"I remember," he said huskily, "only too well."

"I thought of it all," she said, "when you lay here so ill. I suppose it was being unhappy and lonely that brought it all back. When one is happy one does not think much."

"I suppose not," he answered gently. "You had forgotten me, I know."

"No—not forgotten; only put you aside for a little time."

"Well, you have made amends," he answered. "To your care and nursing I owe my recovery. It is a debt I can never repay."

"And yet what haste you are in to leave me!" she said reproachfully.

The blood rushed like flame to his cheek. "For your own sake," he said falteringly. "It would not do. I am sure Neale would not like it."

"There," she said quickly, "you are wrong. He would like what I liked—he would bid me do just as I pleased."

"Don't make duty harder," said Adrian Lyle, with an attempt at lightness. "You know I am an obstinate man."

He kept his eyes resolutely away from the sweetness of that beseeching face. He felt that the worst phase of his madness was this phase, when every innocent look and word could so bewilder his brain, and tempt both sense and reason.

She rose from her low chair at last; a little startled look came into her eyes. "I have talked to you too much," she said; "you look so pale and tired. I will leave you now if you will promise me to try to sleep. There—let me smooth your pillows more comfortably. Is that better?"

"It is delightful," he said, keeping his voice steady by a great effort. "I will take your advice and try to sleep. Would you mind drawing that blind down? Thank you, that will do—the light dazzles me—a little."

He turned his face away; he heard the faint, soft flutter of her gown across the floor; he heard her open the door—close it—and a great darkness and horror seemed to come over him; and he lay there staring blankly, stupidly at the wall, conscious only of an agony which had threatened to master self-control—conscious that something hot and burning touched his cheeks, something that was far removed from sleep, or rest; and, as he lifted his hand and drew it across his eyes, he saw it tremble like a leaf.

"Oh," he cried, "to think that I should be so weak—so pitifully, miserably weak."

## CHAPTER II.

### RESOLUTIONS.

SORELY against the doctor's wishes, and still more against Gretchen's, Adrian Lyle had himself removed to the village inn two days after he had informed her of his resolution.

Worn, weak, wasted, he looked a mere shadow of the strong, brave manhood he had represented a few weeks back. But he was resolute in his determination to leave her roof, knowing now that some treacherous purpose must have lured him there, and fearing trouble for Gretchen in the future, which he would be powerless to avert.

For, like a revelation, there had come to him in his hours of sickness and danger, the belief that Bari had fathomed his secret. A hundred little things served to convince him that this fancy was correct, and he feared the subtle machinations of that wily mind, and dreaded, too, that Gretchen's innocent life might be soiled or smirched by suspicion.

No one should say in the future that he had remained for one hour longer than was imperative and necessary under her roof. There was proof, and to spare, of that. So, gently and firmly, and at his own risk and peril, he put aside her pleas and entreaties, and turned away from her gentle ministry to the rough and grudging care of strangers.

But he felt it was right, and, once feeling that, it was not in Adrian Lyle's nature to swerve aside for any temptings of expedience, or desire. He had ample time for thought during the weary days which followed his removal; ample time in which to face his life as it would look and be in the future. There was no use in putting the question aside; no use in saying he had dreamt a foolish dream. Only too well he knew that that dream was his life's earnest—that without hope, without help, without desire or wish of

his own, he loved this girl, who could never be anything to him; whose heart was given in its first fond idolatry to a selfish and unworthy man."

"It is too late to hide the truth now," he told himself in these hours of dreary self-communing. "Every heart has its burden. Mine is but like the rest. Perhaps in time I shall get used to it—in time——"

He drew his breath sharp, the pain was still so hard to bear; the long, desolate future had never looked so desolate as now, when he set his face sternly towards duty as his only goal.

The doctor was much interested in his patient, and gave him more of his time and attention than he usually bestowed on sick folk. But he saw there was something about Adrian Lyle far beyond the ordinary type of men. He saw, too, that something was troubling him grievously, to the detriment of all drugs and potions; and that his progress back to health was far slower and less satisfactory than his perfect physique and splendid constitution had promised. But neither sympathy nor curiosity won a sign of self-betrayal from Adrian Lyle. He locked his secret into his heart's most sacred chambers. He would discuss anything and everything with the most perfect frankness, but never by word or sign give any hint of the one dark trouble which had come into his life.

Weakness and self-indulgence were not things with which he had any sympathy. He was not likely, therefore, to allow himself the poor comfort of either. Manfully, sternly, bravely he fought the battle out with himself, knowing full well that he would bear its scars to the day of his death; blaming her in no wise, yet conscious to the full how enthralling was the sweet, magnetic grace of her presence, and how vainly he had combated its charm.

"There is no use trying to explain it," he said; "I cannot do it. Perhaps there is no reason why I should. I—I have never tried to understand any woman; it did not seem necessary; and those I have know never seemed to me interesting. But she——"

Then he checked himself abruptly. What use to

dwell on fair face, and tender smile, and every trick of manner and gesture which he knew too well?

"I must get well," he said, resolutely. "I must go back to work and duty. That will be the best cure."

Just then some letters were brought to him which had been sent on from Medehurst. One was from the Rector, pompously lamenting his illness, inasmuch as it had caused great inconvenience and disturbance to his reverend self, and was therefore something to be resented as an ill-advised and not altogether respectful proceeding on the part of a curate; mingling parish details and personal complaints in a curious jumble.

There was another letter, written from Eaton Square, London, which had been sent to his lodgings at Medehurst, and now forwarded. It was dated some weeks back; an eloquent and grateful epistle from the young widow whose cause he had pleaded with Alexis Kenyon. It said how comfortable and happy the writer was, and spoke in high terms of the kindness of the lady in whose house she lived, concluding with innumerable thanks to him for the trouble he had taken on her behalf in procuring her an engagement so much to her mind.

The letter astonished Adrian Lyle. Other events had followed so quickly on that interview with Alexis Kenyon, that he had never even thought again of the woman whose cause he had pleaded. Who then had done this service? It must have been Lady Breresford. It never occurred to him that Alexis Kenyon could have given the subject a moment's consideration after she had dismissed it in such scornful fashion. But he felt pleased to think that the friendless woman whose cause he had pleaded should have been so speedily aided and befriended.

He penned a few words of thanks to Lady Breresford, and forwarded the letter to the Abbey; then wrote to the Rector, saying that he hoped to be back at his post in a week at the latest; that he deeply regretted that circumstances had not permitted him to ask the reverend gentleman's per-

mission to be ill, before taking the liberty of becoming so. He also enclosed a medical certificate as to the nature of that illness and his present condition.

Having thus relieved his mind, he got up and made a feeble effort to dress. The doctor had lent him an old velvet dressing-gown, which was much too short for his tall frame, but he wrapped it round him, and staggered weakly across the room to an easy-chair by the window. Then he sat down, panting and exhausted from his efforts—efforts born more of resolute will than physical powers.

It was close on sunset, and his gaze lingered rapturously on the gold and violet hues of the sky; on the far-off glow of the ripened cornfields; on the leafy shade of the thick woods stretching over the level country; on the herds of cattle crossing the grass-land; the distant figures of field labourers and children, their voices ringing glad and clear on the stillness.

"One ought to be grateful for life," he thought. "The world is so beautiful, and there is always something one can do for others."

As the thought ended with a sigh that would fain have been one of content, there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," he said, thinking it was the servant bringing in his tea.

It opened slowly. On the threshold stood Gretchen.

Though every day he had told himself she might come, yet her presence was enough of a surprise to set his pulses leaping madly and feverishly—to turn face and lips white as death as he gave her his hand, and felt the warm, firm clasp of hers.

"So you are sitting up!" she said, looking down with glad, sweet eyes at his face. "I am so glad! But how ill you look still! Are you wise? And do they take care of you here?"

"Oh, yes," he said with effort, "they are very good, and I am much better. Won't you sit down?"

"I have brought you some fruit," she said, showing him the little basket in her hand. "Grapes, you

sce. I know they are good for sick people, and Peggy made you some jelly. We did not forget you, you see, though you were so anxious to get away from us."

"Is that still a grievance?" he asked, with the grave and tender smile which she knew so well. "How good of you to bring me this—to think of me at all!"

"I should be very ungrateful not to do that," she said, seating herself opposite to him. "I—I suppose," she went on suddenly, "I ought not to say so—but you look worse, much worse, than when you were with me."

"Do I?" he said lightly. "That is because I am up and in ordinary dress again. Don't you know that is the real test of invalidism?"

She was silent for a moment, studying him and his surroundings with a grave earnestness which amused and pained him at one and the same moment.

Suddenly she rose and fetched a pillow from the bed, and put it behind him in the great roomy chair; then she brought a footstool from another corner and placed it underneath his feet, and taking up a large, light, fleecy shawl which she had thrown down on her entrance, she placed it carefully over his knees. "Now," she said, withdrawing to a short distance and surveying the effect, "now that is better. You see you can't do without a nurse yet."

"I wish," he said huskily, "you would not trouble yourself about me. I am not used to—to—such attentions."

"You are not used," she said, "to being ill, so it is different. And men are so careless," she went on with pretty wisdom. "I suppose you forget that you have had that fever with the dreadful name, what you call rheu—rheum—a-tick, is it not? If I were your mother now, or sister, how I would make you take care!"

"Would you?" he said, with a weak attempt at a smile. "I should think it would feel very pleasant. I have never had any one to take care of me."

"You never looked," she said, "as if you needed it before. But it is dreadful to see you so changed."

"I am a gaunt and terrible object, I know," said Adrian Lyle. "I am quite sorry to shock you so. Why did you come?"

"Perhaps I ought not to have come," she said. "I—I was half afraid; I thought you might not like it—but I was very anxious about you."

It seemed to Adrian Lyle that no sweeter words would ever sound in his ears than those. He could not answer them for a moment. A mist seemed to float before his eyes; the sunny room grew dark.

When he had recovered himself, she was busy unpacking her little basket, and it was delight enough to him to lean back there on the pillows she had arranged, and watch her deft fingers; the grace of her every movement; the sunlight playing on her lovely hair; the pretty, tender care she manifested for his comfort.

Presently, the servant who waited on him brought in tea, and Gretchen arranged her fruit and jelly on the white cloth, and set a bowl of roses in the middle, and poured out his tea and brought it to him with her own hands.

How strange it seemed that she should be there, ministering to his comforts! How her personality affected the bareness and ugliness of the room! He leant back in the big chair, and seemed vaguely to realise what poets had said of the charm of a woman's presence.

The soft folds of the shawl on his knees seemed to breathe of her. The very flowers were associated with those days when he had first become conscious of where he was, and had seen her in her simple white gown with a rose at her throat. There was no resisting the magic of this hour. It had come to him unsought—full to the brim of passionate gladness, and yet more passionate dread.

But she was there, before him, close to him, and all the vague unreality of a dream seemed to hold his senses in check, and impress itself upon his brain.

He was very quiet, but his silence in no way distressed her. She felt that he liked to see her there, and the feeling held in it more comfort than she could have expressed.

It was very pleasant to her to minister to him. He, who was so big, and grave, and had always been so strong, was now helpless as a child, and dependent on a woman for those little cares and attentions which smooth the path of convalescence.

And it was just those little housewifely cares and attentions that were so bewildering to Adrian Lyle. That young, grave face was infinitely more charming in its gravity than in its smiles. It spoke of deeper feelings and deeper sympathies; it moved him to reverence as well as to admiration.

The hour passed on, and the sunset faded, and he knew that a double darkness would fall upon him when her presence was withdrawn. Yet never, by word or look, did he cross the barrier he had raised between them; never by faintest sign betray that she was anything to him but a woman to be held in perfect and chivalrous respect.

"You will let me come again?" she said, standing with her hand in his for a moment, looking with compassionate eyes at the wasted face, and the loose wave of dark hair tossed back from the temples.

"Come once more," he said. "Just to bid me good-bye. I must go to my duties next week."

"If you had not been so ill," she said gently, "I would have asked you to explain more to me about all you said in Rome. I go to the church here, but I do not understand the service, and I do not like the priest. I wish I could hear you in your church."

He was silent for a moment, wondering in what subtle guise temptation would assail him next. "If I can be of any assistance to you," he said at last, "pray command me. If there is anything you would wish—explained——"

"There are a thousand things," she said despondingly. "But I will not trouble you. It would take so long."

His face grew white and somewhat stern. "I

never flinch from duty," he said. "I am here for another week. Anything I can explain for you, I will."

"Thank you," she said simply. "To-morrow is Sunday; may I come—to-morrow?"

"Certainly, if you wish," was the quiet response —quiet as only the bitterness of heart-ache and despair could make it.

But how should she know that?

"Fate is too strong for me," thought Adrian Lyle, as day after day brought with it that fair young presence; as day by day his earnest teaching and simple explanations brought the creeds and tenets of a noble faith more and more clearly to her anxious and doubting mind.

She was like a child needing help and encouragement, and like a child she would drink in his words, and listen to his reading of what had long been to her a forbidden Book. Her ignorance and helplessness touched him deeply. The task of leading that young soul to spiritual light and hope, was one that seemed intensely sacred. As strength and health came gradually back, he set all the resolution of his mind to this one object—putting aside his own pain, setting at naught his after-sufferings, if only he might give her help for future trial, or lead her to the highest and holiest of all Comforters, when some dark hour should fill her soul with sorrow.

So he taught, and so she listened in the waning glory of the summer days, and the week he had appointed for his task passed on, and another took its place, and a third dawned before he could quite set himself free. She had begun to depend on him as he had never dreamt she would, and she dreaded being left alone without counsellor or friend.

That difficulty—which is essentially a feminine one —of separating the teacher from the thing taught, made her cling to Adrian Lyle's presence as a surety of what was still vague, and dark, and unrealised. Without him, she felt like a rudderless boat adrift on a dark and unknown sea, and he could with difficulty persuade

her that religion was a personal thing, to be carried on between the soul and its Creator without the intervention of any other human being, were he fifty times a priest.

Gradually, however, he saw a change. Perplexity and doubt were less painful. An aroused conscience and an earthly love seemed to have some common ground of sympathy, and Adrian Lyle's large-souled charity taught her how much it was possible to hope for that future, which all man's wisdom cannot make hopeful by light of science, or by power of reason.

He could have wished his task harder than it was; but with so sweet and trustful a nature he met with no difficulties save those of intense personal humility, and a fear of individual effort almost childlike.

But a day and hour arrived, when he knew he must leave at last. It was then she unconsciously tried all his hard-won control to the utmost. Seeing in him only the priest and not the man, it never occurred to her what tortures she was inflicting. It seemed to her a right and natural thing to sit at the feet, so to speak, of one so wise and good as her teacher; to join the intensity of feminine faith with a fervid belief in the spiritual altitude of its human expounder.

He had guided her through a maze of darkness. He had made life look a brighter, and greater, and more noble thing than ever her imagination had pictured it. He had led her to the footstool of prayer, and opened to her the arms of that great and loving Fatherhood, which, till he spoke of it, had been veiled in mysticism, and shrined at unapproachable altars.

It seemed to her, therefore, but natural that her heart should overflow with gratitude, and express its grief for his departure with the sorrowful frankness of a child.

It was hard for him to look at the entreating face; the tearful eyes; the sad, beseeching lips, and know that by no word or look must he betray the danger of their spell. All that lay in his power he had done for her in his twofold character of man and priest. Now he told her gently, but firmly, that his own duty must

no longer be neglected—that between herself and the God she worshipped must lie the secrets of her heart and the desires of her soul.

If any baser feeling for one moment allured him with its tempting, if the vague mystical wants, the appealing weakness, the childlike trust of that nature whispered how easily might the craft of priesthood spin its web of doom, how easily might the mask of celestial affinity be worn to blind those trustful eyes, it was but the tempting of one dark hour's despair, to be atoned for by such terrible penance of mental suffering as never brain of man conceived.

The hour of parting came, and he left her. She unquestioning, unsuspecting, and clinging to him with tearful entreaties and piteous regrets; and he standing in the mingled light and shadow of the day's last hour, a faint smile upon his lips, but on the haggard face the glow of a martyr's courage, and within the suffering heart, the agony of a man's despair.

"Tell Bari," she said, as she looked longingly up to him, "that for once in his life, he has done me a service. I feel I could almost thank him!"

Oh, light words, careless, inconsequent, impulsive, how darkly and with what bitter pain was the future to recall their memory, even as the past was stretching out to claim them with a hand of doom!

## CHAPTER III.

### THE CHILL OF CHANGE.

Days of storm, and chill winds, and heavy rain, followed Adrian Lyle's departure.

Gretchen's time was all her own now. She had nothing to interrupt the monotony of long hours: hours spent with blank face pressed against the window panes, or bent over some dull and instructive book, and only varied by aimless wanderings through the sodden lanes around her lonely dwelling.

Her heart yearned for news of Neale. She woul study the papers for intelligence, but they conveye little comfort to her mind; and since Adrian Lyle ha gone, she had no one to speak to on the subject.

"A letter must come soon," she thought, watchin with the sickness of hope deferred that brooding sky line, dark and cheerless as her own life now. But da followed day, and week followed week, and still n message reached her.

She tried to remember the teachings she had latel received, to trust and pray, and lay down the burde of her anxious heart at the footstool of infinite mercy but it seemed a hard task, and she had not ye mastered the difficulties of a faith which needed no human intervention, and was independent of huma aid.

"If he were here!" she would cry often and ofte in troubled hours of loneliness and doubt. Her sou seemed full to overflowing of thoughts she could no speak; of difficulties she wanted explained; and having no outlet, she could but shut them into th secret chambers of her heart, and try to pray a Adrian Lyle had bade her pray.

He wrote to her sometimes; but the words seeme strained and cold, and threw her back upon herse as it were. Those letters were penned with sever resolution. They were more like words from maste to pupil than of friend to friend. Reading them, sh could not possibly dream of the tender and enthu siastic nature, the warm sympathies, the generou heart that would fain have poured itself out befor her had it dared. Often she closed the pages with sigh.

"I must have been a great trouble to him, she thought; "and yet how good and patient h was!"

Gradually as time wore on, and quiet hours o study and of thought ripened her mind, and exercise her judgment, she found herself, almost against he will, comparing the natures of these two men wh seemed destined to influence her life. She bega insensibly to put Adrian Lyle into Neale Kenyon'

place, and to ask herself how he would have behaved under similar circumstances.

For, despite her blind belief in and passionate love for Neale, she could not but acknowledge that, since he had brought her to his own land, his conduct had strangely altered. Was he ashamed of her, that he would not introduce her as his wife to his relatives at Medehurst; that he left her buried here in loneliness and gloom, a prey to weary heartaches and dismal fancies, as yet uncheered by word or message from himself?

Sometimes the little house became a horror to her. In the cold, gloomy days of the waning summer it seemed to chill her with dread, to grow darker and gloomier, as if some mystery breathed in its narrow corridors and empty rooms, and whispered behind the closed doors which shut her out from all the world of life and love beyond.

She grew impatient of her own folly; but she could not shake it off. Her mind had grown unhinged, and was shaken by storms of intense feeling, which left behind as intense a depression.

Interest in her surroundings, studies, and household duties daily declined. She began to realise, by a process of slow torture, that love was not all in all to a man, as it was to a woman.

She put herself through phases of severe catechism to discover whether any fault of hers had caused this change; but she could find nothing save excess of love, and for that, surely, he would not blame her.

In real truth, Neale Kenyon was going through a period of delirious excitement, which left room for no other thought. He had written his farewells, because his light and selfish nature hated the idea of a distressful scene—of a woman's tears and laments. He had sent Gretchen ample money for the next six months, and he considered he had done his duty to the uttermost. He knew she would miss him, weep for him, pray for him, as all young and tender female creatures do; and the knowledge gave a little touch of sentiment to the closing pages of his romance. For they were closing pages, alas!

Not that he had ceased to love Gretchen, far from it; but mixing with men of the world, and hearing daily from scoffing lips how lightly a woman's reputation is regarded, how poor a trophy seems her love once it is won, he began to think he had done a somewhat foolish thing and to ask himself uneasily, "What would become of Gretchen in the future if—if ever she learnt the truth? She might learn it so easily—a mere accident could reveal it, and then——"

But at this point he invariably broke off and rushed to billiards, or brandy, or cards, or the society of the wild and fast young fellows who made up the larger portion of the officers of his regiment.

He was not unmindful, not unloverlike; only the present protested against the past, and called it "fancy." That was all.

A man could not go in for sentiment when the graver duties of life were calling for his notice. It was all very well for women; but men were different. So he set his face towards a new land, and talked of glory and danger in a breath, and sent no word to the longing, aching heart which had spent so much of thought, and passion, and care on him.

"She'll be all right," he told himself, "for a time. I must wait and see how affairs turn out. This war was a splendid chance. Alexis can't bother me here; and as for Gretchen, Bari will let me know all about her. And now 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof'!"

It was no wonder, therefore, that Gretchen vainly waited and looked for that letter which never came; though she little suspected that he who should have written it was excusing himself with light and airy falsehoods, deploring gracefully as a folly what to her was ruin; lightly overleaping obstacles and ignoring serious complications as misfortunes which might touch, but certainly ought not to impede him, in his enjoyment as a man of the world, and a soldier of fortune.

He almost succeeded in deceiving himself by the frankness with which he treated the matter, and the philosophical calmness with which he gradually began

to regard it. He would never let Gretchen suffer—he would take care of that; but really it was almost a relief to be rid of that extreme high pressure of sentiment which the early days of his love had called forth. He was much more comfortable without it. He had got over the need of that one presence —the craving for sight of face and sound of voice— which is love's earliest delight, and misery.

Had he seen Gretchen again he might have been less complacent and more loving. But he had not done so, and absence, and excitement, and entire change of life had effectively cured the fever and restlessness of passion. A little blank, a tender memory, a chance thought—this was the stage at which he had arrived. No moral earthquake, no conscience-stricken taunts; just a gradual cooling down of temperature moral and physical; a faint tinge of regret, not altogether unpleasant under some moonlit sky ablaze with tropical stars, violet as her eyes when they had looked back to his.

But these were passing shadows, accepted discomforts; not serious or continuous, like that rebellious agony which racked poor Gretchen's soul.

Ere the autumn days had come, for which she looked so hopefully, he had almost forgotten her existence. He was in the thick of bloodshed, hardships, dangers. Life was a round of imperative duties and daily self-denial. Farther and farther away was pushed that brief little dream of love that was to have been eternal—of memories that were to have outlived life. He never thought of himself as faithless, because as yet he had committed no actual breach of faith. Accusation had not jarred on him; reproach had not disturbed him. It was simply a drifting apart— gradual, and to him painless. Of all it might be to her, he never thought. Memory was not tyrannous to him. He had action and excitement, while she had only stagnation.

There is no doubt that our surroundings help or impede us in the struggles between right and wrong, duty and inclination—no doubt that a man can throw off the oppression of thought far more

easily if he is active and strong; can work, smoke, hunt, fight, do any or all of those manifold exploits which call for physical exertion, and are the best panacea for "worries."

Neale Keuyon might have been sensitive to opinion, but none was expressed that could personally affect him. He would have shrunk from Adrian Lyle's contempt, from Gretchen's piteous reproaches; but he was far beyond the reach of either, and his weakness and egotism suffered no shock, nor in any way disturbed him by whispers of the miserable punishment of wrong-doing.

It is not often that a man's own conscience becomes his Nemesis, though preachers and moralists delight in telling us so. It is when his own world, his own surroundings, visit on him the penalty of offences against themselves, give plain name to plain sin, and strip an evil action of its gloss, that the full meaning of his misdeeds stands revealed, and sophistry and excuse look like poor and shredless rags, instead of comfortable covering.

But Neale Kenyon had still his sophistries, and not a shiver of approaching chill disturbed their comfort. His own self-respect was not a tribunal for appeal, and the opinions of others were not likely to be called in question. Every sun that set widened more and more the distance between Gretchen and himself, and one day, as if to add the finishing touch to the barriers he had been erecting, came a letter from Léon Bari:

"It is with some diffidence, Monsieur," he wrote, "that I allude to the delicate subject on which Monsieur was good enough to take me into his valued confideuce. Monsieur had scarcely left England, and Madame was still weeping over his farewell letter, when a comforter appeared. It did not surprise me, though it may surprise Monsieur, for I saw many things in Venice and in Rome, to which he was a little blind. The friend of Monsieur—Mr. Lyle—discovered that Madame lived alone in the quiet retreat Monsieur had found for her. He called, merely as a mark of courtesy, no doubt, but un-

fortunately—accident, which is not always courteous, overtook the kind priest, and left him ill and helpless at Madame's door. Like a good Christian, she took him in and nursed him back to health. Then he removed himself to the village near by, and Madame visited him daily; and he in turn gave her 'spiritual' instruction and counsel, which seemed speedily to console her for Monsieur's absence. Two months passed thus; they parted then, but they correspond regularly. In Monsieur's interests I have observed all this, but for Monsieur's consolation I would say 'women are always thus.' A few tears, a little fret, and then it is the new lover who pushes aside the old. Madame was young, fresh, ingenuous; true—but Monsieur will recollect how eagerly she listened to him—how ready she was to leave home and kindred at his bidding. She is but as all her sex are, when to them is given—opportunity. Well, she was dull, lonely, *ennuied*, and the handsome priest came, as if from Heaven, to console her. I think Monsieur need have no fears now when the time comes to tell that secret which must assuredly be told one day. There will be consolation ready for Madame, and Monsieur's conscience may be quite at rest. One word I will say—it is of warning, and I give it but for sake of my devotion to Monsieur, and what may be for his future benefit. The young lady—Miss Kenyon—is somewhat interested also in this Mr. Lyle, and it is not unusual, I believe, for English clergymen to marry rich wives. It would be hard for Monsieur, I think, if the grass were cut under his feet in both his 'affairs' by this priestly rival. But they are dangerous, these religious men, and they do manage to get a great power over the women. Monsieur will pardon the liberty I take, it is entirely in his own interests. The beautiful young heiress is, to my mind, a far worthier object for Monsieur's affections, and I fear, if Monsieur does not announce his engagement, that the priest will win her from him. Monsieur may say, 'But the priest knows of the secret, and may inform the young lady heiress!' True—but Monsieur may trust that matter to his

faithful servant. Nothing is easier than to cut free that entanglement; nothing easier than to present it in its true light to Miss Kenyon—who is after all not the credulous *ingénue*, and not to be easily shocked at what is of everyday life to a man, young, and handsome, and courted, as Monsieur. Besides, there is always the priest, and the convenient illness. She would excuse Monsieur her cousin, but she would not excuse the saint who had charmed her ear, and represented himself to her as a being great and superior.

"I trust Monsieur will not say I take a too great liberty in putting the matter thus before him. I hope Monsieur enjoys the best of health, and I await Monsieur's instructions, with the assurance that I am his faithful and devoted servant,

"LÉON BARI."

This letter at first threw Neale into a violent rage.

That he should neglect and forget Gretchen was one thing; that she should so easily and readily console herself for his absence was another and totally different affair

He had long disliked Adrian Lyle, as a smaller and lower mind always dislikes one cast in a grander mould, and innately noble and self-sacrificing. He knew well enough that Adrian Lyle was interested, deeply and fervently interested in Gretchen's welfare, and that thought was an added sting to the memory of his own selfishness.

But that he should dare to lift his eyes to Alexis Kenyon—he a mere curate, without influence, without name, or interest, or position—seemed a piece of insolence for which Neale could find no excuse. He remembered what an attraction the young clergyman had seemed to possess for his capricious and critical cousin, and his own dread of any intimacy which might lead to betrayal of his own actions in the past. Was this dread to be realised? Was he to lose both love and lucre at the bidding of this meddler?

The rage and jealousy in his heart swept away the last barrier between himself and an irremediable dis-

honour. Without further thought or consideration he went to his tent and dashed off two letters: one to Sir Roy, bidding him announce his engagement to Alexis publicly; the other to Bari, saying briefly:

"Explain to 'her' that we must part. Say what you please; but remember I mean to marry Miss Kenyon."

To Gretchen he sent never a word. It was such a comfort to be able to call her fickle, false, contemptible; no wiser, no truer, no better than any other of the light fancies of his selfish youth.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### CONTRASTS.

MEANWHILE Adrian Lyle had gone back to his duties, looking like the mere ghost of his former self. He was not really well enough to undertake service, but he insisted on doing so, and the Rector did not see fit to combat a resolution attended with convenience to himself.

It was a surprise to Adrian Lyle, as he took his usual place, to see the Abbey pew tenanted by Alexis Kenyon and her father. It surprised him, too, to notice the shock that his presence seemed to give them. Evidently he had been expected; but he made no allowance for his changed and haggard looks.

To Alexis Kenyon that sad, worn face, so aged and haggard, was more than a surprise; it was a painful and startling shock. The Rector's droning complaints of his Curate's illness and its many inconveniences had in no way prepared her for so great a change, and for once her heart grew compassionate and almost gentle, as she pictured what he must have endured ere his physical strength could be so reduced.

Much to her father's surprise, she had remained at

the Abbey all this time, evincing not the slightest inclination either for travel or society, which had hitherto been second nature. Sir Roy was inclined to put it down to Neale's absence and the danger he was incurring, although Alexis rarely alluded to him, and then only in the coldest and most indifferent manner.

Perhaps nothing that Adrian Lyle could have done would have held her fancy arrested and almost chagrined as this absence of his. Often she had wondered if it was intentional, or if some hidden motive lurked behind; but the first time her eyes rested on his altered face convinced her that his illness had been infinitely more serious than she had even imagined. When she saw him in his old place, when she heard the deep thrilling tones of that musical voice, her heart seemed to lose all its frozen calm, and a feeling of content and peace stole over her for almost the first time in her life.

She told herself it was only pity that moved her to so swift and sudden an emotion; only pity that made her linger in the church porch after service, in order to speak to him once more. Perhaps, too, it was only pity that made her ask him to the Abbey to luncheon, an invitation, however, which he firmly but gently refused.

"I am not fit for company yet," he said. "I shall just go home and lie down till the evening service. I had no idea I should feel so knocked up."

"You must have been very ill," she said. "It quite shocked me to see how changed you were. I suppose you had some stupid country doctor to attend you and no one to nurse you. I wish you had been sent here."

He coloured faintly.

"I did very well," he said. "And I was carefully looked after, I assure you. The doctor was both kind and skilful. I shall soon be all right again."

Then he turned to Sir Roy. "I hope," he said, "you have good news of your nephew."

"None at all—as yet," announced the Baronet. "He always was a bad correspondent. Things look very serious out there though, and I am getting

anxious. I see his regiment is ordered to the front."

"Yes," said Adrian Lyle gravely. "I saw that too. I wonder he does not write."

"You would not wonder, if you knew him as well as we do," said Sir Roy, with a glance at his daughter.

She made a movement of impatience. "If you won't be persuaded, Mr. Lyle," she said, "I must bid you good-bye. I hope you will come to the Abbey as soon as you feel stronger."

She said it with a coldness she was far from feeling, for she felt hurt at his refusal. The memory of it haunted her all that afternoon, while she sat under the trees on the lawn with a book which she never read, and felt that her expectation of his presence had been almost a certainty, and had enlivened the long service and the weary sermon.

She did not go to church again, and for the next few days kept away from the village entirely. She told herself she could afford to wait, he would be sure to come to her as all the others had done; but the week went by and Sunday came again, and she had not once seen him.

When she rose that morning, she thought that nothing would induce her to go to the service, but, despite resolution, the carriage was ordered to come round for her. Her father did not accompany her, but as he stood at the hall door to see her off, he called out, "Bring Mr. Lyle back, if you can. I want to have a talk to him."

This time, Adrian Lyle did not refuse the invitation, which, however, she extended to the Rector also, for reasons best known to herself, and which he accepted with the alacrity of one who likes good cheer, and knows he will get it.

The drive was a somewhat silent one. Adrian Lyle looked certainly better, though he was still far from strong, and infinitely graver and more absorbed than he had been before that sudden and unexplained absence. Yet, despite his silence and gravity, Alexis felt strangely content. It was pleasant to look up

and see that calm, grave face opposite; pleasant to hear his voice addressing her, to know that for the next two or three hours she could claim his attention exclusively. She let the Rector have his say during the drive, though he bored her dreadfully—there was all the afternoon to look forward to, and she smiled as she thought it would be very possible to make good use of it.

The day was chill and gloomy, the sky gray. Already the leaves were falling rapidly, and the trees in the avenue had lost much of their summer glory; but within the Abbey itself all was warmth, luxury, beauty.

A wood fire blazed in the great hall and shed its light over the carved oak furniture, the skins and rugs, the pictures and statues, the palms and flowers, the hundred-and-one articles of beauty and art, with which it was embellished.

And when luncheon was over and Sir Roy had dragged the Rector off to the library, and Adrian Lyle found himself established in the most luxurious of chairs before the blazing fire, with the graceful and charming figure of Alexis Kenyon in close proximity, he would have been very ungrateful if he had not acknowledged that the hour and the scene were pleasant.

She was determined that they should be so; and for that end and purpose made herself as gentle and womanly as hitherto she had been cold and repellent. All the infinite charm of mind and manner which she possessed she used now, as means to an end which she had vowed to accomplish. She told herself that merely intellectual curiosity moved her in her endeavour to read Adrian Lyle's nature, as she had read scores of others; but if that were so, the curiosity was subservient to an interest which defied analysis; which invested his looks, tones, gestures, with a meaning no other man's had ever possessed.

They had discussed many things and disagreed on many points before Adrian Lyle found himself calm enough to put to her a question which had troubled him for long. And even then—despite

preparation and control—there was a change in his voice which her quick ear at once noticed.

"Can you tell me," he said, "what has become of that Italian servant of your cousin's who was with him when I first made his acquaintance? He has not accompanied him to the war, I suppose?"

"No, of course not," she answered. "But I have no idea where he is. Perhaps my father knows. He had a very high opinion of the man. I cannot say I agreed with it. I always disliked him. I had a feeling he was not honest. Oh, I don't mean to say that he would rob or cheat you; but he was not straightforward in his dealings."

"I thought so also," said Adrian Lyle.

He was looking gravely and thoughtfully into the fire, and her keen eyes noted every change in his face, and wondered why the mention of this name should be one of interest or disturbance.

"I have often wished to know," she said presently, "where and how you met Neale. His descriptions are always vague. I could never learn anything from him."

"There is not much to learn," said Adrian Lyle. "It was at Venice. We did the usual sights there; wondered at the numbers of churches, still more at the numbers of pictured saints; were rowed about in gondolas; explored the Doge's Palace; were pestered by guides and beggars; admired St. Mark's, and did not feed the pigeons; walked up to the top of the Campanile; then went on to Rome, and there parted. You see there was nothing in the least interesting or romantic about our acquaintance."

"Was his sight quite strong—then?" she asked curiously.

"He used to wear glasses sometimes," said Adrian Lyle. Then he looked straight at her. "Why do you wish to know about our meeting?" he asked in turn.

She looked somewhat disturbed by the direct question.

"I did not suspect a mystery," she said with a little laugh, "nor a romance, knowing Neale as I do." But even as she said it she noticed that a sudden flush

leaped into Adrian Lyle's pale face, and in her heart she whispered: "There was something—I am sure of it."

"Your cousin," said Adrian Lyle coldly, "is not romantic; at least, so I should say."

"Most men are not romantic, though all, they say, have their romance," she answered, looking keenly and critically now at the flushed and troubled face, whose calm a chance word had disturbed.

He smiled a little bitterly.

"Perhaps," he said; "you ought to know a great deal more on that subject than I do, Miss Kenyon."

"And yet," she said, "clergymen hear strange stories and are the recipients of strange confidences sometimes."

"The stories of breaking hearts and sorrowful lives," he said gravely; "not things to interest you."

"How can you tell?" she asked suddenly, and her eyes flashed with defiant light. "Why should you think me so cold, and hard, and indifferent?"

"Pardon me," he said, somewhat startled, "I never said I thought you—that; but you appeared desirous of obtaining the character."

"I think," she said, and her voice grew strangely soft, "I am a mass of contradictions, and no one has ever taken the trouble to make anything out of them. It is my own fault, I know. I have always been proud that I could stand alone; that I was perfectly independent of sympathy, or love, or even friendship."

"You are putting that independence," he said, "in the past. I imagined you were still capable of it, and still proud of the fact."

"You are fond of plain speaking," she said. "Supposing I told you I had begun to feel that necessity for sympathy and affection which underlies all feminine natures, would you believe me?"

"I should not be so rude as to doubt your word, Miss Kenyon, though I might the depth or extent of a new fancy."

"Of course you would only credit me with a 'fancy,'" she said bitterly. "That is your large-

hearted Christian charity, Mr. Lyle, which professes to believe the best, and thinks the worst."

"No—you wrong me," he said quickly. "I have not much faith in words which give but new names to new caprices. The soul's zeal manifests itself in the life's work. A few empty phrases cannot alter the selfish indiffereuce of years."

"If you were any other man," she cried with sudden, hot anger, "I would ask you how you dared to speak to me like that? But," and she laughed slightingly, "your profession has its privileges, and fault-finding is one. On the whole I am not sure that it is not an agreeable variety to unmixed adulation. I may at least conclude it is sincere; and now—to return to our first subject—have you any special reason for wishing to know where Bari is? If so, I can procure his address from my father."

"Thank you," he said, "I should be glad of it. I have a special reason."

She wondered what it could be, but she did not like to ask, and he did not pursue the subject. He looked pale and fatigued as he leant back in his chair, and she watched him furtively from behind the hand-screen of feathers which she held between herself and the fire.

For some time they were silent. Then the servauts brought in lamps and tea, and the dusky old hall looked its best in that mingling of rose-light and shadow.

Adrian Lyle looked round with a little sigh.

"This sort of thing," he said, as he took a cup of tea from her hand, "spoils one for work-a-day life, Miss Kenyon. I am not used to luxury, and I think it is not good for me."

"It would be very good for you at present," she said gravely. "You look wretchedly ill still, and as if you needed care. Have you no mother or sisters to come and look after you?"

"No," he said, "I am quite alone in the world. My parents died before I was six. I was brought up by a bachelor uncle, who educated me and sent me to college. But he died, too, very soon after

I had taken orders. My story is very commonplace, you see, and my life seems destined to be a lonely one."

"I wonder," she said, looking at him thoughtfully, "why you became a clergyman?"

"Do you think I am not suited to the vocation?" he asked, smiling. "I think no other would have suited me so well, though in the first instance I only agreed to it in deference to my uncle's wishes."

"And afterwards?"

"Oh, because of my own. I was glad when duty and inclination ceased to fight. They had rather a hard tussle once."

"I should fancy that you have very strong ideas of duty," she said. "It must be rather troublesome, that perpetual struggle, that constant sacrifice of oneself and one's own desires. And after all it ends in the same way—annihilation and forgetfulness."

"We differ on that point, you know," he said gravely. "If the end were only annihilation, then probably our best plan would be to get all possible good and pleasure out of life at any cost."

"If there is any to be got," she interrupted. "The world seems to me a narrow place with but few resources."

"And you are content to believe in no other; no wider sphere of thought and feeling; a nobler and more perfect existence for the unfettered soul, that here knows no lasting content?"

"If you could convince me," she said, "that individual life is anything but a law of nature, more often regrettable than advantageous; that that life is ruled by aught but implacable laws, which are not to be altered or turned aside, then you might also convince me that something was to be attained by your belief in an after existence, and by constant deeds of virtue and self-sacrifice in this present one. I confess," and she looked gravely at his pained face, "I should like to be convinced, but no one has yet succeeded in the task."

## CHAPTER V.

### "A WAR OF INTELLECTS."

THERE was a moment's silence after those words.

At last Adrian Lyle lifted his head and looked straight into the beautiful, mocking eyes.

"Is that a challenge?" he asked; and something of sternness and rebuke in his voice brought the colour to Alexis Kenyon's cheek.

"Would you accept it," she asked, "if I said—yes?"

"Assuredly," he answered. "He is a poor soldier who denies his colours. Your creed would be a cold, comfortless thing when sorrow and bereavement touched your heart. You may well say there can be no use in appealing to an unknown Power who cares for neither suffering nor prayer. You make all the gifts, purposes, and good of life of no effect at once; whereas our religion teaches that all things have a wise purpose, a destined end; that our aspirations and ideals cannot sink into dust and ashes with the decay of the body, but live on and on to attain higher perfection in a Future, that an all-powerful Mercy and an all-perfect Wisdom has destined."

"Words," she said, "but not proof. All you ministers have the same vague platitudes; but when we want to bring you down to a plain and natural explanation, you take refuge in these poetic flights. You like plain speaking. I have listened to your sermons, and I know you are enthusiastic; but enthusiasm would never convince me. I pity all the poor and struggling souls that doubt as I have doubted, and all to no end, to no purpose."

"I think," said Adrian Lyle, "that even in doubt there is an end and a purpose. A Hand may be guiding you to light even when you least expect it. The ground must be broken up before the foundations can be laid. The birth-hour of Truth is often heralded by the dark night of Disbelief."

"Oh, I am not an atheist," she replied. "Only, as I told you, I have thought a great deal about this subject, and read and discussed it, too — as yet, without result."

"It is a great subject," said Adrian Lyle gravely, "and one that finite minds can never quite explain. To my thinking it has always seemed that the highest morality, the noblest type of life, is the religious life. If modern writers could give one anything better than the precepts of Christianity, anything that would comfort, sustain, console, I should not mind their doctrine so much; but they take away what is bread, and put a stone in place of it."

"You believe, then, all you preach?" she asked inquiringly.

"Most decidedly," he answered. "Else would I never have insulted my Master's service by professing it."

"In that case," she said, "we argue from totally different premises. I have accepted a theory which to you seems blasphemous. You answer my questions by statements of your own faith. Had I that faith, there would be no need to argue. But I have it not. I believe that every breach of the natural and moral law entails an adequate penalty; but no prayer or penitence can avert such penalty. Therefore, prayer and penitence are but waste of time and emotion. If a man does not wish to suffer, he must not sin. Is not that reasonable?"

"Perfectly. But where would you find men and women with the moral strength to follow such a doctrine? Sin surrounds us like the air we breathe. We cannot escape from it. The hopelessness, and the misery, and the sorrowfulness of life, impress themselves upon us far more than its joys and pleasures. Thus is the soul awakened; for nothing in the world satisfies it. There is that within which craves and calls for something higher, purer, more satisfying. This call it is that first makes prayer an imperative need, and then an inexhaustible comfort."

"I have felt the need," she said, looking at him with eyes softened and regretful, and holding none of

their usual mocking brilliance—"but I have not found the comfort."

"Perhaps," he said, "you have never sought it aright. Your nature is too analytical, and—pardon me if I say also—too cold to be easily satisfied. The strongest argument in favour of another life may be formed in the eminent unsatisfactoriness of this. Nothing lasts, nothing contents, nothing suffices. The soul wars against the body; existence is a perpetual conflict. But I have often thought that that very discontent, that call and cry of the spirit, is the best proof that a future awaits it, where its needs will be satisfied, and its sorrows set at rest."

"You lay great stress," she said suddenly, "upon sorrows. Yet I should not fancy you have suffered many yourself."

"Every heart knoweth its own bitterness," he answered, with a smile of infinite sadness. "Perhaps mine has been of my own making. That is of no moment, however. I am disturbed about you at present, and I seem somewhat powerless in your hands, as I have never studied these great sceptics with whom you seem so familiar."

"Do you think," she said daringly, "that you could venture to do so? Because I am equally willing to be your teacher, or your pupil. If I cannot convince you, I should like you to convert me. I warn you that poor old Mr. Bray gave up the task in despair."

"Did he?" said Adrian Lyle. "Well, I am not used to giving up tasks unconquered. Let it be a bargain. If you fail to convince me that I am wrong in holding a faith, I shall do my best to prove you are wrong in denying one."

"Agreed," she said, and the screen of feathers trembled a little in her hand. A faint tinge of colour warmed her cheek, which was not due to the fire-flames now.

A little thrill of triumph ran through her veins. She said to herself:

"It is the thin end of the wedge. . We shall see who conquers in the end!"

At the same moment the door leading into the

library opened, and Sir Roy and the Rector appeared.

"We have come for some tea," said the Baronet cheerfully. "Mr. Bray says it is nearly time for him to go home, as Lyle is not strong enough to take the whole service. You certainly don't look fit for hard work yet," he went on, addressing Adrian Lyle. "Are you really going to preach to-night?"

"Yes," was the quiet response as the young clergyman rose from his chair. His eyes met those of Alexis Kenyon. They seemed to convey a mute challenge.

She smiled a little. "I shall come and hear you," she said.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE TRUTH AT LAST.

Adrian Lyle procured Bari's address from Sir Roy, and wrote to him sharply and indignantly, demanding to know the reason of that infamous falsehood which had had such dire results for himself.

The wily Italian only laughed at the letter, and threw it into the fire. He had his own game to play, and he cared little or nothing for the young clergyman's wrath.

He was employed in going backwards and forwards between Paris and London on mysterious missions, and he knew that Adrian Lyle would find it a difficult matter to reach him, even were he so disposed.

That he was not disposed or able to do it, helped in a great measure to let the matter drop, so far as Adrian Lyle was concerned. He heard no more, and he attributed the affair to some monkeyish malice on the part of Bari, which he probably would never explain. He was convinced that Kenyon knew nothing of it, and so left him to learn it from Gretchen.

He could not bring himself to write to the young man: he was too indignant at his neglect and selfishness—a selfishness which he had fathomed long before, in those days of their Italian travels.

So time wore on; dismal days of rain, depressing days of gray mist, and gray clouds, and chill winds; and life set its accustomed tasks to Adrian Lyle, varied now, however, by constant visits to the Abbey.

He had accepted the challenge of Alexis Kenyon, and she kept him to his word. He could not but allow that she was an interesting study—that he had never met a mind so cultured, a nature so strange. Hers was no emotional nature to weep over shortcomings, and deplore weakness; to suffer morbid remorse as Gretchen had suffered, or cling to priestly help and guidance as Gretchen had clung. In Alexis Kenyon the reasoning faculties would never be subservient to "feeling" or "faith." She was clever by nature, and cleverer still by training, and aptitude, and research. The paths of life had always been made smooth for her. She had seen more of the world than many women of her age; she had generally done what she pleased without fear of contradiction; and if she had ever had fits of generosity, or heroism, they had always been so lauded that she had grown to dislike their very names.

No one had ever had the courage to speak the truth to her, to tell her what Adrian Lyle had done. Therefore, perhaps, no one had ever interested her so much.

That the interest did not decrease with better acquaintance, surprised her more than she liked to acknowledge. She smiled at his fervour; she combated his arguments. She called his principles rigid, and his faith and zeal emotional; but all the same she admired the man's thoroughness, and envied the very fervour at which she mocked.

To himself it seemed that he made no headway whatever against that critical indifference and subtle intelligence which ever and always arrayed itself against his theories and beliefs. Her nature rebelled

instinctively against the bondage of superstition, or the illogical paths of traditional religion.

Like Stuart Mill, she believed in the "utility of virtue," but she would not acknowledge its basis as Divine.

"It is only a matter of temperament, I assure you," she would say calmly. "One person feels an irresistible inclination towards cruelty or tyranny, and ends by murdering some one. All the world cries out on him in horror! Another is too weak and too placid even to feel the sentiment of anger, and he in his turn is displayed as the reverse side of the medal, an epitome of all that is moral and amiable and forgiving. Where is the justice of such reasoning? Given a certain nature we must do certain things. There is no help for it. You have no more right to say I am wrong in my views, than you allow me with regard to your own. I have the courage of my opinions; so have you. I have given them as much thought and study as you have given yours; who is to prove that I am wrong, and you are right?"

Sometimes, however, she would lay aside all criticism and coldness, and do her best to charm him by an assumption of womanliness and humility, such as she rarely showed. At these times she was most dangerous and most alluring, and Adrian Lyle could not but acknowledge that she well deserved her reputation.

Yet this intercourse, this constant exchange of speculative thought, this straying into new pasture-lands of scientific and rational facts, had a disturbing and troublous effect on Adrian Lyle's mind. So many of his cherished faiths and theories were unprovable, that at times he could but ask himself: "What if I, too, am wrong?"

At such times there would arise before him the vision of a fair face with a little cold smile on the parted lips—a face pure and exquisite as a flower fed on dew and sunlight, and bidding him believe that, like the flower, it could have but its brief day of life and glory.

"You give me faiths, not proofs," she would say. "They sound noble, and I do not deny that you exemplify them in your daily life; but they don't satisfy me." And at times he thought he never would satisfy her.

Meanwhile the growing intimacy between the young clergyman and Alexis gave Sir Roy Kenyon a great deal of uneasiness. He was used to Alexis's caprices; but this seemed to him something more than a caprice.

It was unusual for her to show such interest in any one as she had betrayed for Adrian Lyle from the first hour of their meeting. It seemed to him that it would be only wise to give the young man a caution on the subject—to hint that Alexis was destined for her cousin, though the engagement was not as yet openly announced.

One evening, therefore, when Adrian Lyle had been dining with them, he asked him into the library, instead of suggesting that they should follow Alexis as usual.

"I want a few words with you, Mr. Lyle," he said. "You know I am a plain-spoken man, and I think it best for both our sakes to take you into my confidence. You are a friend of my nephew's, so perhaps you are aware how fond I am of the boy. I have always looked upon him as a son in fact, and my earnest hope was that one day he would become so in reality. Well, I am happy to say my wishes are on the way to be realised. Before going abroad Neale proposed to my daughter, and she accepted him."

"Impossible!" broke from Adrian Lyle, as he sprang to his feet, pale and disturbed. "You—you can't mean this, Sir Roy."

"Mean it—I most certainly mean it," answered the Baronet, reading in the agitated face and manner of the young clergyman a verification of his suspicions.

"Neale Kenyon engaged to your daughter!" muttered Adrian Lyle stupidly. "It can't be. You —you ought to know——"

"What ought I to know?" demanded Sir Roy sternly. "The boy was free to follow the dictates of

his heart, and though my daughter might have made a far more ambitious marriage, yet I was well content that she should accept her cousin. Hers is an extremely difficult character to deal with, but he has known her from her childhood, and——"

A knock at the door interrupted him. A footman entered with letters. Sir Roy's eye caught the one on the top. He seized it eagerly.

"Why, it is from Neale," he cried. "Oh, my dear boy, this is delightful!" He tore open the flimsy envelope, and perused the few hurried lines. "He is well," he said below his breath. "Well, and—um—um—um. Why, what's this? 'No reason to keep my engagement to Alexis a secret any longer, unless she specially desires it.' There, what did I tell you? See, it's in his own handwriting; read for yourself."

Adrian Lyle drew back a step, as if to widen the distance between himself and his excited host.

"It is impossible," he repeated doggedly. "If I thought it——"

His eyes flashed; he drew himself up to his full height. At the same moment the door softly opened, and Alexis looked in.

"What is the matter?" she asked, as she hurriedly advanced and glanced from one to the other of the disturbed faces. She had never seen Adrian Lyle look as he looked now.

Then her eyes fell on the letter in her father's hand. Her face paled a little.

"From Neale?" she questioned. "Is he safe?"

She took the little strip of paper and read it hurriedly and anxiously.

Then a slow wave of deepest crimson rose from cheek to brow. Involuntarily her eyes turned to Adrian Lyle.

"Miss Kenyon," he cried impulsively, "I only ask one word. Is this true? You are to be your cousin's wife?"

The colour faded slowly away. It was a very cold, defiant face that lifted itself to his.

There was strife going on in his soul. Clearly enough she read it. Had her hour come? Was this

the triumph she had promised herself? Those gray eyes, dark with hidden fire, told a tale of passionate trouble: some sudden, intense emotion was vibrating within his heart. What could it be but the shock of what he had heard, what her father had foolishly betrayed? She felt a little thrill of fear, and almost of regret, as she looked back into those proud, indignant eyes.

Yet her sense of pleasure was keener than either the fear or the regret. A smile, cruel, cold—the smile he knew so well—just parted her lips. She answered simply:

"It is true."

It seemed to Adrian Lyle as if the room surged round him like a sea. The noise of a million waves beat in his brain, and made him deaf and dizzy. He wanted to be alone, to get away from these wondering faces; to think out clearly, rationally, what he should do, how he could avert this calamity.

Sir Roy looked at him with compassion.

"Poor fellow!" he thought, "so he, too, has singed his wings."

For how could he know this grief, and horror, and bitter, bitter wrath were for the sake of his nephew's dastard act and lasting dishonour? How could he tell that Adrian Lyle was looking down now at a bottomless gulf which seemed to yawn before the unconscious feet of an innocent and betrayed girl?

What he said; what he did; how he got out of that room, Adrian Lyle never knew.

But he was out, and the cool wind was blowing on his brow, and the wintry stars looking down on him through the leafless avenue, before he seemed to recover the power of thought or realise what had happened.

"I must go to her," he kept saying over and over again. "If he has written; if he has told her this it will kill her, poor, lonely, forsaken child!"

He was in that state of feverish excitement when the limbs move without the consciousness of will. He noted nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing; only he heard again those cruel words which had at last sealed

his oft-recurring doubts; only saw as in a dream the little cold smile which had meant Gretchen's doom.

Gradually terror and rage usurped the place of that unconscious stupor. The thought of Kenyon's baseness maddened him. All that was manly, and noble, and generous in his own soul cried shame on the cowardly weakness and selfishness that could make a woman's love the toy of an idle fancy, and regard the ruin of her future as lightly as the memory of his past.

Suddenly he lifted his face to the cold, clear sky. His eyes shone with a fierce light.

"If it be true," he cried aloud, "if it be true, he shall answer to me for his guilt. I swear it!"

# Book V.

## CHAPTER I.

### IN THE TOILS.

Adrian Lyle went home to his lodgings and wrote a note to the Rector, stating that important business called him away for a day.

The first train by which he could reach Leawoods left at six in the morning; there was nothing to do but wait.

He threw himself down on the couch, but sleep was impossible. He was tormented by the image of Gretchen's face; the thought that even now she might be suffering all the tortures of betrayal. It was nothing short of agony to him to picture her under the first shock and horror of this revelation; for he never doubted but that Neale Kenyon had written to her.

As he recalled the night when the young man had given him that assurance of his honesty, he felt furious with himself for his ready credence. The searching light of the present revealed only too plainly the blackness of the past.

All through the dreary hours he lay there fighting with conflicting emotions, a prey to such remorse and agony as assuredly would never have troubled Kenyon himself.

It was a relief when day broke, and he had some excuse for movement and occupation. He bathed and changed his clothes mechanically, and lit a spirit-

lamp to make himself some tea before going out in the chill, raw air. Then he walked away to the station so hurriedly and eagerly that, as a matter of course, he had to wait twenty minutes there for his train.

It was a dreary journey, and he was faint and wearied before he arrived at the little station he so well remembered. As it boasted of no refreshment-room, he got into the musty old fly which was waiting for chance visitors, and drove to the inn. He knew he should need all his strength and self-command for the task before him, and that fact gave him courage enough to delay the meeting, even against his will.

When he reached the cottage, his agitation was so great that for some time he walked up and down outside its sheltering laurels. It needed all his powers of self-command to enable him to open the gate and enter.

It seemed to him that the place had a dreary and deserted aspect. The roses and creepers were mere brown twigs trained against the windows; the warm flower scents no longer made the air sweet with a perpetual incense. Mystery and gloom shrouded it under brooding sky and shadowy woodlands, and silence intense as death seemed to hold it like a spell.

Though Adrian Lyle was not imaginative, the stillness and dreariness oppressed him with an inexplicable horror. His step made no sound on the sodden grass; the door was standing open; and, seeing no sign of bell or knocker, he entered the little dark hall.

A sound of voices reached him; involuntarily he stopped and listened. They came from a room on his left—low, suave tones that woke an answering memory, and then a cry, passionate and indignant, which set his pulses leaping, and seemed to force him like a motive power in its direction. His hand was on the door; it opened; he stood on the threshold of a small room; the table was littered with books and papers; a wood fire burnt dully on the open hearth; and facing him—her face white as death,

her eyes ablaze with wrath and indignation—stood Gretchen. Before her, his hands resting on a chair, over which he leant with insolent ease, was Bari!

It needed but a second for Adrian Lyle's eyes to take in the scene. Then—he was in the room, and at Gretchen's side, and she was clinging to his arm, sobbing like a frightened child.

"Oh—send him away!" she cried wildly. "He is so rude, so insulting—— Oh, how can I tell you? He has said that Neale and I were never married—that I have no right, no claim—that—— Oh, Mr. Lyle," she broke off wildly, "say it is not true. I was so young and so ignorant. What could I know of forms and ceremonies? You know—you met us; say it is not true. I will believe your word against a thousand oaths of his."

Clinging to him with trembling hands; looking up at him with tear-drowned eyes; her heart rent and shaken with agony; what likeness was there between this sorrow-stricken, passionate woman and the young, glad-souled creature on whom Adrian Lyle's eyes had rested with such wondering admiration that night in Venice?

Involuntarily he took her hands and held them closely, and the very touch of his seemed to bring her strength and comfort.

He turned to Bari, and something in his eyes made the crafty Italian cringe, and falter, and shrink away—so grand and kingly did his accuser look.

"You pitiful cur!" he said, holding back, as in a leash, the fierce and wrathful words which had been raging in his brain, "how dare you come here with your cowardly threats? Who sent you?"

"My master!" said Bari; but his voice faltered, and he drew nearer to the door. Even clergymen had been known to be violent under provocation.

"Your—master!" dropped slowly from Adrian Lyle's white lips. "I don't believe it."

"He has a letter from Neale; he showed it me," sobbed Gretchen; "but I don't, I can't believe it. How could he marry his cousin, when I am his wife already?"

Adrian Lyle loosed her hands and led her to the door.

"Go," he said, firmly but gently. "It is not fit that you should listen to this man's insults. Leave him to me."

Meekly as a child she obeyed. That sense of rest, and peace, and comfort, which always came to her with Adrian Lyle's presence, held her passive and content even in this hour of strained and torturing agony.

The moment the door closed he turned to Bari, and faced him with stern and unflinching eyes.

"Now," he said, "tell me the truth—if you can."

An evil smile crossed the man's lips.

"In the character of Madame's new—protector?" he said sneeringly. "She has not had to wait long."

Adrian Lyle's face grew white as death. He made one step, seized the man by the shoulders, and shook him as a dog shakes a rat.

"Another such word," he said, "and I will toss you out of the window, like the carrion you are! How dare you insult an innocent woman in my presence!"

Bari grew livid. But he was too great a coward to resent openly. His day would come, he told himself. To strike in the dark was often easier and more satisfactory.

"I only told the truth," he said. "Mr. Kenyon bade me inform this—lady"—with a mocking tone that made Adrian Lyle's blood tingle in his veins—"of his intended marriage with his cousin. Those 'breaks' are of every-day occurrence with men of the world. I suppose Monsieur knows that, even though he wears a priest's cassock?"

"Do you mean to say," demanded Adrian Lyle, "that Mr. Kenyon was not married—legally married? That all this time——?"

"Mr. Kenyon had the best intentions," said Bari, coolly. "But, unfortunately, the circumstances were romantic, and the legalities troublesome. Mr. Kenyon carried the young lady off from her home, and from her intended vocation—that of a nun. There was no

time for ceremony of—any sort. No offence, Monsieur," as he saw the dark flush that leapt into Adrian Lyle's face. "I am only stating plain facts."

"But the priest," muttered Adrian Lyle, 'the priest who, she said, married them in Vienna?"

An evil smile crossed the man's lips. "Some form was gone through, I believe, to satisfy her. She was so eager to get away from her home and people that she was easily satisfied. But they are not legally married, and Mr. Kenyon is tired——"

"Silence," thundered Adrian Lyle. "I do not know which is the greater villain—your master or yourself. You have evidently aided him effectually in this rascality. But you have not only a defenceless woman to deal with; you shall answer to me for every deceit you have practised, for every lie you have devised. The world shall know Neale Kenyon as he is!"

"Monsieur's intentions are doubtless as wise as they are — disinterested," sneered Bari; "but he cannot undo what has been done, and he would be wiser to make the best of it. His attentions to the young lady have long ago excited Mr. Kenyon's suspicions. His presence under her roof on this and other occasions may have compromised her more than Monsieur thinks. After all, there is no need to make a great disturbance. The field is left free, and if Madame weeps a little at first, Monsieur is at hand to dry her tears, and give her spiritual consolation——"

He got no further, for Adrian Lyle seized him with a grip of iron, and the next instant he found himself lying full length on the grass plat before the door, which shut with a loud and sudden clang in his face.

Breathless and panting, Adrian Lyle stood in the little hall, and asked himself with sudden horror what he was to do?

A wall of blackness and infamy seemed closing round that pure and innocent life. He felt powerless —he too had been deceived. His heart was wrung with agony—yet all its pity and devotion could not

ward off the blow that must surely fall on that young head.

"How shall I tell her?" he groaned aloud. "How—shall I tell her?"

As the words left his lips he felt the touch of a small cold hand—it drew him gently, unresistingly, into the room he had just left. A face hueless as marble looked back to his own. In all the days and hours that had brought him face to face with sorrow, and misery, and shame, he thought he had never seen any face look so piteous and so sorrow-struck as this one.

"Don't deceive me," she said in a hard, changed voice. "You at least will speak the truth. Is it quite true—what Bari said——?"

"My poor child——" he faltered.

She drew back a step or two, holding out her hands as if to ward off a blow.

"Not yet," she whispered faintly. "Give me a little time. I have not been strong lately . I can't bear it just yet——"

He saw a change come over the white face, the swaying figure, but he stood there fixed and immovable in his own great misery.

There was a sofa near her. She suddenly sank down upon it; and he watched her lay her face upon the crimson cushion, and cover it with her trembling hands, as though she wanted to hide it and herself from even his compassion.

"Do men often behave so?" she said at last, in the same cold and strained voice. "Bari said it was quite—usual. I am so ignorant. I did not know . oh, how it all comes back! The warnings, the care, the strictness. I can understand it all now . . . It was from this they wanted to save me . . . . from this . ."

He looked for tears, he hoped for tears, but none came. She was beyond their poor relief. The stab had gone to the core and centre of her faithful heart.

"You did not guess?" she asked suddenly, dropping her hands, and looking straight at him, "you never thought but that I was his—wife?"

"He swore to me that you were," said Adrian Lyle hoarsely. "I thought there might be something not strictly legal, not quite as usual; but he said when you came to England he would make all that right, and have the ceremony performed again. Did he not do so?"

She shook her head, and once again let it fall in the same helpless fashion against the crimson cushion.

There was a moment of intense and painful silence.

"What can I do?" she said at last. "He . . he is tired of me. I can see that now—so plainly. Were I fifty times his wife, I would not force him back. What is the value of an empty heart . . . an empty form? And he wants to marry his cousin now. Bari says it will ruin his whole future if he does not."

"Do not believe Bari," interrupted Adrian Lyle, as he slowly paced to and fro the narrow room. "He is an infamous liar!"

He stopped beside her, and looked down at the quiet figure and the hidden face. For a few seconds all the room was still. When he spoke at last, his voice was low and broken with intense emotion:

"In the sight of Heaven," he said, "you are his wife. He cannot forsake you in this heartless and selfish fashion."

Then he remembered the letter Sir Roy had shown him—the words of Alexis Kenyon. Here was proof enough of perfidy. His arguments could not convince even himself—how could they convince her?

"Did he write to you?" he asked gently.

"No," she said. "Only to Bari—he showed me the letter. He has never written to me," she went on, with a little quiver in her voice, "since he went abroad. I know he is tired. Everything shows it."

"This is no mere question of a passing fancy," said Adrian Lyle sternly. "There are such things as duty and morality to be considered."

She pushed the loose and tumbled hair from off her delicate temples, and looked at him with sad and burning eyes.

"Do you think," she said, "I could hold him against his will now that he does not want me? I thought his love was like my own. But it is not—it never could have been. I I would not have pained him for all the world could offer. But he——" She said no more, only laid her hand upon her heart with a gesture of mute despair.

The growing pathos of the young face—young, alas! no longer with the light and radiance of the spirit within—tried to the uttermost that self-control which Adrian Lyle had set upon himself with fierce determination.

"Something must be done," he said at last. "You cannot be flung aside in this fashion. Let me appeal to his uncle on your behalf. He is a good and honourable man—he——"

"His uncle!" she interposed with sudden passion. "*Her* father? Tell them my pitiful story?—ask their compassion, their aid? Never! I would die first."

"But what will you do?" he urged, and the misery in his face would have touched her to the quick, had she seen it.

"I shall go home," she said piteously. "I will tell them that they were right and I was wrong. I committed a great sin, and I must bear its punishment."

"Oh, no," he cried wildly. "You shall not. The sin was not yours."

"It was mine," she said resolutely, "in the first instance. I deceived them, and I disobeyed them. I am justly punished."

He drew back. He felt as if the ache and torture of his heart must speak out, or it would stifle him. The veins in his temples swelled like cords, his face grew ashen white.

Suddenly she looked up at him, and those deep eyes full of earnest sorrow and bitter pain startled her like a revelation.

"You have always been so good to me," she faltered. "I don't know why, but you have. I remember what you said about my needing a friend . but you can't help me now."

"I can," he said passionately. "And I will. Do you think I am not man enough to resent such an insult as this, to a trusting and defenceless woman? Is your life, that was so beautiful and innocent, to be flung aside in this cruel manner?"

She put out her hand as if to stay the impulsive words.

"I gave him my life," she said slowly. "It was his to do with as he pleased. . He does not need it any longer—that is all."

Then she rose and stood for a moment there, with her hand resting on the couch as if to steady herself.

"You must leave me now," she said. "I want to be alone—to think. It is so hard to realise that all is over—for oh, I loved him so—I loved him so!"

The tears came then. She threw herself down on the couch once more in a tempest of grief, which shook all Adrian Lyle's self-control to the uttermost.

"Yes, I will leave you," he said with effort. "I can do nothing: I can only say, try to bear it—try to remember there is consolation above, far surpassing that of earth. I will come and see you to-morrow, if I may."

She did not answer, she could not frame any words. She only put out her hand, cold and trembling, and wet with her tears. He held it for a moment, looking down at her with mute anguish. Then gently, solemnly, he bent his head, and touched with cold and quivering lips those trembling fingers.

Then her hand dropped at her side once more, and a sense of stillness and deadness seemed to come over her. The paroxysm of weeping passed. She heard the sound of a closing door, the faint, dull echo of a passing step. But thought was paralysed for a time. She was only conscious of lying there, her face against the cushion, her eyes closed to the sunlight, as the brief winter's day melted into early gloom—lying there, her young life uprooted, and flung into the dust; the agony of a living death fastening with cruel pangs upon her heart.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE SHEEP REJECTS THE FOLD.

It seemed to Gretchen that she had lived through years of suffering when, at last, some sense of consciousness came back to her.

The room was dark—the fire had long since died out. Her numbed and shivering frame seemed scarcely capable of obeying her will, as with a supreme effort she raised herself from the couch, and dragged her limbs across the room. Her hand was on the door—she had it partly open, when the sound of voices speaking in the hall roused her attention.

Something familiar in the tones of one struck sharply on her senses, and fear, and wonder, and terror quickened her numbed brain into action. She was in the hall in an instant, and facing the two dark and sombre figures who had been parleying with the old serving-woman.

As the light fell on her face and figure they stood as if transfixed, and relief and terror seemed to hold her by turns, as her faltering tongue gave faltering welcome—a welcome that received no response.

The door of the little front parlour was open; lights were there and a fire. Instinctively Gretchen led the way thither, and they followed.

The door closed, and they turned and faced her as judges face an accused and guilty prisoner. Appealingly she stretched out her hands.

"Tante!" she cried, amazed and fearful. Then, relapsing into the old familiar tongue, she went on: "How did you find me? And now, oh, I want you! I want you! You will forgive me, and take me home, will you not?"

But the beautiful, stern face never changed. It seemed as if words would not come. Then the second figure stepped forward, and threw back the long, shrouding veil. It was Sister Maria.

"Oh, miserable girl," she cried, "well may you need us! Dearly have you paid for your folly!"

Gretchen shrank back, pale and appalled. "You!" she faltered.

"Yes; even I. When at last we learnt where you were, I resolved to accompany your aunt to England. Your sin has killed the good old man, whose roof sheltered you. He died, holding your name accursed——"

"Ah, no!" cried Gretchen wildly. "Don't tell me—that; you break my heart."

"It is true," said the Sister relentlessly, "and it is your work. Terrible has been your sin. You are accursed, and a thing of shame and reproach in men's eyes! Nay, do not speak. We know all your miserable tale, down to this day's incident, when the man, for whom you sacrificed your hopes of Heaven, has cast you aside like a broken toy. We have waited and watched for this hour, knowing it would come, as surely as the day brings the sun. Seven months ago you left the roof that had sheltered, the love that had guarded you, the service to which you were vowed. The history of your sin, and of its punishment, is written on your face. You bear its curse within you—a brand of living shame will sear your life, and turn its every hour to misery. Wilful, disobedient, criminal, so you stand now in sight of Heaven and man—a thing at which the virtuous shudder, and which all men will mock at and despise!"

Like one transfixed, the girl stood and listened to that fierce denunciation. Not at first, not all at once, did its full and terrible meaning flash upon her brain; but gradually a sickening horror, a dull throb of heart and pulse, the consciousness of a secret but recently learnt, stole through her startled mind.

She looked from one to the other of the stern and unmoved faces, and a great fear and terror leapt into her eyes. She sank on her knees and hid her face from sight.

"I sinned, I know," she faltered; "but it was in ignorance and in love—and Heaven is merciful. It

will pardon. Oh, cannot you forgive me too? You do not know what I have suffered."

"Your suffering," said her judge, "is but just. As for pardon, it is for you to earn it. The Church you forsook will still open her arms to you, if you turn to her in penitence. The shelter from which you fled will still receive you, if meekly and humbly you confess your sin, and accept its penance. Your shame may be concealed, and its reproach removed; but all the years of your life must atone for it. The world and you have done with each other from this hour!"

Those harsh and condemnatory words stabbed Gretchen's heart with sharp but salutary pain. This self-appointed judge had overstepped the limits of the girl's own consciousness of wrong. Her soul and spirit sprang up in rebellion, and for a moment lent her brief strength and brief forgetfulness.

"I will not go back with you!" she cried. "Tante is different, I owe her my duty; but to you and your Church I owe nothing but misery! It was your harshness and cruelty that drove me from my home, that left me so defenceless. I will not return with you, or join your Sisterhood, even to hide what you call my shame. I have been cruelly deceived; but my ignorance and helplessness were alone to blame, and they are the faults of my bringing-up. I believed, until to-day, that I was Neale Kenyon's wife. To-day only I have learned the truth, and—and I must suffer for my folly in trusting a man's love and a man's promises. But that is a matter for myself alone. You have no right, and no power, to force me to resume the chains I once so willingly broke."

"This is blasphemous!" exclaimed Sister Maria. "Has he, then, made you a heretic, to add to his crimes? Do you know what you are saying? Your folly and disobedience will leave their mark upon all your life. You cannot live that life as other women do. You are shamed, accursed——"

"Oh, hush!" broke imploringly from the girl's white lips. "I cannot bear more; my strength has all gone——"

She broke down into passionate sobs, and suddenly flung herself at the feet of that silent figure with the marble face and burning eyes.

"Tante! Tante!" she cried; "say one kind word. Don't you forsake me, too. Think of when I was a little child—happy and innocent; think of how I craved for love and tenderness, and all was cold and blank around me. Don't you, too, say I am lost, and shamed, and beyond forgiveness—if only for my mother's sake; my mother whom I never knew, but who would have pitied me—now!"

What was the change in the calm face? Something, something, surely, as those tear-dimmed eyes looked up to it in their agony of beseechment. A quiver of paling lips, a flush, a tremor, something that seemed to recall to the kneeling girl a dream long past—a dream of when she was a little child.

Involuntarily the proud figure stooped, the arms went out in answering sympathy. There were tears brimming in the down-bent eyes, and then—a chill—a moan almost of despair. The arms fell at her side—empty still. The face took back its marble pallor; the eyes held only anguish, dumb, despairing as a spoken doom. . . . .

"Beware!" said a voice. "Remember your penance!"

Whatever of pity, whatever of softness or remorse had thrilled Anna von Waldstein's proud heart, seemed once more frozen back by that warning. She drew back a step; but as she did so, the girl's overwrought strength seemed suddenly to snap like a bow unstrung. She had borne so much that terrible day, she could bear no more. Without a sound she fell senseless as the dead at the feet of the woman who had repelled her!

## CHAPTER III.

"AND I—WHITHER SHALL I GO?"

THE sound of a clock striking the hour aroused Gretchen from what had been a sleep of utter exhaustion after her fainting-fit.

She was lying on her bed, covered with some warm wrap. A light was in the room, burning dimly in its shadows. She lay quite still, and tried to recall all that had happened in the space of one brief day. In slow and fragmentary thoughts it all came back, and she slowly rose to a sitting position and shivered as with cold, while her eyes roved restlessly around the room.

No one was there. The house was still as the grave. She wondered whether they had left—those cold and cruel women who had had no pity on her desolate plight, not one compassionate word for her misery. One by one their words came back to her with clearer meaning, with more bitter shame. She leant back against the pillows sick at heart, and tortured by a vague fear that sent the blood in a burning flame to her brow, and made her pulses beat with fitful and uncertain measure.

How had they found her, she wondered; and, having found her, could they, indeed, drag her back to the bondage she had once escaped?

She felt weak and powerless. There was no one to whom she could appeal, save Adrian Lyle; but he was not here; he could not help her now. She must depend on herself. Something must be done, and soon.

It was midnight now. Perhaps in the morning they would be there to force her away; to chain her back into the old slavery. The Church of Rome had a far-reaching hand and a grip of iron. She seemed to feel its pressure once again, and to feel also the old sense of weakness, and powerlessness, and dread.

Desolate, forsaken, unloved, so looked her life as

it stretched into vague to-morrows that could bring her no hope or peace ever again. She put her hand to her eyes; they smarted and burned with a weight of tears which, she felt, she must not shed yet. She must act, and act at once. Time enough for weeping by-and-by in the dreary days to come. Mechanically she rose from her bed, and went to the window, and looked out. The night was dark and starless; but she felt glad of the gloom. It would assist her in that scheme which dimly floated through her fevered brain—a tremulous hope of escape and some distant refuge, where she could hide herself from all who knew her sad story, and begin a new life: a life of toil, perhaps, and hardship, but a life that might still bear within it one small element of hope that should rescue it from utter despair.

She was as ignorant of the world as a child. She had never yet had to trust to herself, or depend on herself. The simple notions and habits of her past life still clung to her, and the only other experience she had attained was from books.

She dropped the blind and went over to the press, where her outdoor clothes hung. The first thing that caught her eye was that beautiful cloak with its bordering of rich fur, that Neale Kenyon had bought for her as his first present. The sight of it was like the ghost of a past happiness. She shuddered and turned away, and took down from its peg a thick, dark cloak of some rough homespun stuff, and a hat of the same. Then she put a few necessaries into a small handbag, and took what remained of Neale's cheque—some forty pounds in notes and gold—and placed her purse, for greater security, in the bosom of her dress.

These arrangements completed, she went to her door and softly opened it, and looked out. All was dark and still. With bated breath and noiseless step she crept down the stairs, and so made her way into the little room where Adrian Lyle had seen her that morning. The window opened on to the garden, and she knew she could leave the house by it without making any noise, or risking any discovery. She was now in that strained and excited state only possible to

extreme youth—youth in its pathetic exaggeration of sorrow, its magnificent follies, its intensity of despair.

The sense of action, of freedom, of the keen, cold air, the dark and quiet night, gave her a sense also of strength and force. She walked on in the opposite direction to the village, her thought being to get to the station at N——, where she might find a train to a large town which she had heard old Peggy speak of as being some fifty miles or so away in that direction.

Here she would be easily concealed amidst noisy crowds and streets till she could get further away.

It seemed to her distraught and fevered brain that she could never put distance enough between herself and her persecutors. They would be sure to pursue her. They had found her once, they would find her again. She knew now that Bari must have led them to her retreat, and, remembering the insolence and triumph of his face, she marvelled what she had ever done that he should hate her so.

The air was cold and damp, but she hurried on so swiftly that she never felt it. Her eyes wandered in a blank, unseeing fashion over the deserted fields, the long stretch of hedgerows. Before daybreak, however, she became conscious of sudden and overmastering fatigue, then of pain sharp and acute, which turned her sick with terror and paralysed all her strength.

Gradually it dawned upon her that to proceed further was impossible. The intensity of physical pain overmastered every other feeling. She only longed for some shelter, some spot where she could lie down and suffer in silence. She left the road and turned into a narrow lane, and wandered aimlessly on, scarcely conscious of what she was doing. Presently she entered a little wood, dark and damp and desolate enough in the gray dawn of the wintry day. She staggered on a few yards, and then half fell, half seated herself, on the mossy trunk of a fallen tree.

She could not tell how long she had been there when a voice roused her. She looked up, and saw

an old withered face, wrinkled and witch-like, before her. In some dim and far-off way a voice reached her ears, but the sense and meaning of it were alike unintelligible.

Then again the death-like throes of mortal agony seized and racked her frame, and with some instinctive appeal from sex to sex she stretched out her hand to the fierce, strange-looking creature who stood there mumbling and muttering in that strange fashion.

Whether she understood or not, Gretchen could not tell; but she beckoned the girl to follow her, and she rose blindly and stupidly and staggered on over the rough, uneven ground till she reached a miserable-looking hovel, dark, mean, unsavoury as a human abode could well be. Under any other circumstances nothing could have induced the girl to enter such a place; but the extremity of mortal agony which seized her again, overpowered either scruple or consideration. She went in, and the door fell behind her.

It might have been some half-hour after when the full sense and peril of her situation pierced Gretchen's numbed and frozen senses, and the terror of what was inevitable now, added another pang to the fear of discovery.

From the miserable pallet on which she lay she stretched appealing hands to the wretched-looking being, on whom her only claim was that of kindred sex.

"Promise me," she implored, in agonised entreaty, "promise me you will hide me here; you will tell no one—no one who I am. I have money; I am not poor; I will reward you—only promise——"

The broken words, the foreign accent puzzled the old woman considerably; but as she loosened the girl's cloak and helped her to divest herself of her heavy garments, she found the purse which Gretchen had concealed in her bosom, and that discovery was an argument as effectual as convincing.

"Don't thee fret thysel'," she muttered. "I'll tell none o' thee. There, now, do thee keep quiet.

I'll do my best, though it's a poor place and naught in it for a lady like thee, so weak and young."

Then Gretchen heard no more, remembered no more; but seemed to plunge into a world of darkness and solitude, alternated by paroxysms of intense suffering that racked physical endurance to its very utmost.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### ARE YOU FRIEND OR FOE?

THAT evening and the ensuing night had been passed by Adrian Lyle in tortures of indecision as to what was best to be done for Gretchen. Full well he knew that in her situation the friendship and assistance of any man would be liable to misconstruction. Bari's insults had hit home, and, even in the darkness of the night, a hot flush rose to his cheek as he thought of them.

No doubt she was right when she said she must go back to Dornbach; but when he thought of that cold and unlovely home, those rigid faces, that mass of bigotry and narrow-mindedness to which she must appeal, his heart sank within him, and the ordeal seemed too terrible a one for her to undergo.

Racked with pain, doubt, and misgiving, he never closed his eyes all through that dreadful night. With the first gleam of day he was up and out on the road to the cottage, longing, yet dreading, to behold the poor suffering girl. How had she passed those hours? What comfort or hope had come to her in the dark night-watches?

He thought of his own prayers on her behalf; of all the fervour and passion of his soul poured out before Heaven; of the bleeding agony of heart which he had carried to that altar of his faith; and then, sharp and cruel as the poison of doubt, there came to him the memory of a mocking voice, saying in its clear, cold music:

"That Power you call Divine is a very far-off and unapproachable thing. It rules the world by laws which are not to be altered or controlled, and it seems the height of folly and presumption to suppose that any human prayer or human sorrow can effect an alteration that would be looked upon as individual benefit."

Was she right? Were faith and prayer alike useless, and were the laws of God so fixed and immutable that the sins of the guilty must fall upon the heads of the innocent?

He looked back upon the past—upon those first days of his meeting Kenyon and Gretchen, and the doubts which had then arisen. Why had he not spoken more emphatically? Why had he not warned Gretchen then, and left it to her to make her betrayer keep his promise? Kenyon had loved her then, and loved her well enough to yield to entreaties which now had lost their charm.

He had simply wearied of her; perhaps conscience had been capable of stinging him with self-reproach in her presence, and so he had seized eagerly upon that excuse of going abroad, and had trusted to time to soften the blow whose fall he must have determined even then. The guilt and misery of this sad history grew more and more distinct to Adrian Lyle's mind; its every detail and incident were clearly illumined by that light which past doubts shed upon present knowledge.

Yet the intense pity he felt for Gretchen and Gretchen's sufferings, dwarfed every other feeling. That pity gave him strength in this hour of his own weakness; strength to comfort and befriend her at any cost to himself; strength for self-mastery as he drew nearer and nearer to her dwelling, and knew that he must once again face her in her misery, and sustain her in her helplessness.

He found himself at the gate of the cottage while still these thoughts were in his mind, and his soul was struggling to lift itself in brief petition for help in this hour of weakness and of need.

Then he lifted the latch and entered the garden.

The cottage was all dark and silent, and he scarcely dared knock for admission. Perhaps she might be asleep. Yet even as the hope crossed his mind, the door was suddenly flung back, and he found himself confronted by a stranger.

The apparition was so unexpected that he drew back a step, unable to frame any inquiry. A stately figure; a proud, calm face; eyes that seemed to leap into sudden life and hold his own, and yet, while so holding them, recall a swift and breathless memory. This was what he saw as his stammering lips at last broke their chain of silence and faltered out the name which was in itself a mockery.

The face before him grew paler than before; but all the suppressed passion and fear of the proud heart spoke out in the beautiful eyes, and in the broken whisper of the quivering lips. "She is not here. She has fled away in the night. Are you a friend? Have you brought any news?"

She was close to him, trembling with eagerness and almost it seemed with terror; close to him, and again that swift strange thought flashed through his brain, and left him startled and confused.

"I am a friend—yes——" he said, looking, wondering at that agitated face. "Surely you cannot mean she is not here. Where could she go? She knows no one."

The woman drew back a step. "Come into the house," she said briefly, and Adrian Lyle followed her.

The beating of his heart was so swift and violent that it was almost pain. Involuntarily he laid his hand upon it and so stood there in the gray, dull light waiting to hear what was to follow.

"You are her friend," went on the voice hurriedly and brokenly. "Thank Heaven she had one. Can you give me any clue as to where she has gone? I—am her only relative now. I learnt she was here. I came over from Vienna last night. I was prepared to take her home—to her old childish home once more. I told her so. This morning, she was not in the house."

"Not in the house!" faltered Adrian Lyle. "Are you sure—are you quite sure? It was but yesterday she told me that she was going back to you—to her old home at Dornbach, and you were sure to receive her. Why should she have gone away?"

The proud, cold face grew strangely agitated. "I—I fear we were too severe," she faltered.

"We——!" echoed Adrian Lyle, looking round doubtfully.

"I, and the Sister of the Convent at Dornbach. She wished to receive the child back as of old had been determined."

"And she would not go?" questioned Adrian Lyle eagerly.

"No; she said so last night. But she was ill, fevered, and distraught, and scarce knew of what she spoke. I left her calmly asleep. Half-an-hour ago I went to her room: she was not there; her cloak and hat were gone; everything was in disorder, as if she had prepared for flight. That is all I know."

"And the Sister, where is she?"

"In her room, asleep. She does not know yet."

Adrian Lyle felt sick with sudden horror. Fevered, distraught, knowing her own disgrace, seeing her last hope of love and shelter failing, what desperate deed might the girl not have committed?

The foreboding of evil was too strong to be resisted. White and shaking, he leant against the table for support, and vainly tried to frame some rational excuse for this unaccountable action. "May I see her room?" he faltered at last. Without a word, his companion rose and led the way.

His eyes seemed to take in everything. The bed where she had slept; the open press; the little slippers thrown carelessly beside a chair; the window from which, on that memorable June night, she had leaned to speak to him.

"Yes, she must have gone away," he said slowly; and his voice sounded strange to himself, and there was that in his face which called Anna von Waldstein's attention to it, and held it fixed and wondering for many moments.

During those moments Adrian Lyle was living over again every detail of his love for Gretchen—its folly, its impossibility, its despair. What his face betrayed, he never imagined; but the eyes that watched it grew strangely soft, and the calm voice shook as she said: "You cared for her, too. Did you know her story?"

"I learnt it," he said, "but yesterday."

"And she—she was right in what she said," exclaimed Anna von Waldstein brokenly, "that man deceived her all this time."

"He deceived me also," said Adrian Lyle. "He swore that she was his wife."

"Then it was not her fault——"

"Her fault!" he cried passionately; "you, to ask that! You, who know all the purity and innocence of that lovely nature! You, to whose cruelty and coldness she owes her present sufferings! You, who would have condemned her to that death in life which only a bigoted faith calls holy—her fault!"

His voice broke—his self-command had all forsaken him. The catastrophe that had now happened was the one thing he had not expected, and was utterly unprepared for. These harsh and bigoted guardians had terrified the poor distraught girl into an act, whose result he dared not contemplate. He could not reason calmly any longer. The restraint, which he had put upon himself for her sake, was but a feeble reed against the torrent of passionate dread and longing and despair which now swept over his heart.

He turned away from the little chamber; it was filled with haunting voices, and memories more terrible still.

At the door a figure barred his progress . . the figure of the Sister whose description he had heard long ago from Gretchen's laughing lips.

That sight—those stern, forbidding features, and passionless, cruel eyes—seemed to set the seal of certainty upon his suspicions.

For a moment he paused and looked back at the

questioning face, and from that to the bowed and shuddering figure which cowered in dumb agony on the chair which had once held Gretchen's form.

"You have done your Christian work very effectually," he said. "Think well of what your answer will be, when the God whom you profess to serve demands at your hands the young and suffering soul you have this day sent out to its destruction!"

Then he passed from the room and from the house, scarce knowing what he did, or whither he went.

Left alone, the two women looked at each other. The one face amazed and indignant; the other shaken from all its proud calm and composure, agonised, humiliated, despairing, as one who looks on a lost hope.

"We were too hard on her," she cried brokenly—"too hard. She was so young."

"What has happened?" cried the Sister. "Who was that man? He looked like an English priest. What does he know of Gretchen?"

"He was her friend," answered that broken voice. "But she has fled even from him."

"Fled?" faltered the Sister. "Do you mean that she is not here?"

"No."

"But where has she gone? Why should she have fled from us?"

The proud face raised itself and looked back at its questioner. "Why? Can you not guess? What did we offer her that should in any way tempt her to such a home? . such a home! Oh, Heaven!" she murmured, falling on her knees and hiding her face in her shuddering hands, "why did I not let my heart speak as it would? . . I might have saved her. I might have held her safe in my empty arms this hour!"

"Your heart!" dropped in cold scorn from the frigid lips of the Sister. "Do you forget its secret? . its vows . its penance self-entailed from the hour its guilt was known?"

"No!" she cried amidst her broken sobs. "I have never been allowed to forget them for one moment of my miserable life."

"It is your penance."

"A penance more bitter than death, more cruel than human injustice."

"Your sin was great . . . . so need be your atonement. This girl . brought forth in shame, the child of sin . . has but obeyed her natural instincts. You at least have done your duty that should ease your heart and satisfy your conscience. Vile, wilful, contumacious, she has chosen her own path. Let her go. From this hour the Church she has wantonly forsaken closes its doors upon her. We have done all we could do. Again I say, 'Let her go!'"

There was a moment's silence. Then — calm, resolute, with the intensity of a fixed resolve, beautiful with the softness of human love, that at last had found power to overthrow the cruelty and oppression of long restraint—that white, proud face of Anna von Waldstein raised itself and looked back at the woman who had been to her the representative of conscience and Heaven for long and bitter years.

What it was that had come to her in this moment; that gave her so strange a strength, so calm a resolution; she neither knew nor stayed to question. It was there, within her, flashing the light of truth on long darkness; breaking with its new and vivid force the chains of long bondage.

"I have listened to you," she said tranquilly. "You say that through you the Church you obey so blindly has spoken. It is for you then to attend to its behests. But another voice speaks to me—the one voice to which I have been condemned to turn deaf ears for so long and weary a time. It is the voice of human love. I will seek this poor child through the length and breadth of the world, but I will find her and comfort her, and tell her that one heart loves her despite sin, and folly, and weakness. Together we will live our lives as we have never been permitted to live them yet; together we have suffered, together

shall love and pity bind our broken hearts. What comfort has your cold creed ever given me? What did it do for her? Only turned her yearning heart to the deceitful promises of human love; only leaves her now outcast, helpless, and betrayed! If she has fled, ours were the hands which drove her forth; if she has sought the last refuge that the desolate and broken-hearted seek, then on our heads is the guilt of human blood, and Heaven will seek her life at our hands."

As the passionate words rang out the Sister grew white and rigid with mingled terror and wrath.

"This is blasphemous," she faltered. "I must not listen to such words. The Spirit of Evil must surely have entered into your soul before you could speak thus of holy things."

"I care not," answered Anna von Waldstein vehemently. I have borne, I have struggled, I have suffered. I can do so no more. Go your way; let me go mine. The worst is over. I have naught to fear and little to hope. I cannot suffer more than I have suffered, I can bear no more but what I have borne."

"You may have to bear more, O rash and headstrong fool," hissed the fierce, low voice of the amazed and wrathful Sister. "I have your secret—do you forget?"

But there was no fear in the proud eyes, now only defiance—haughty, fierce, stormy with the passion of a heart too long controlled, and yet uncrushed and undisciplined still, taking vengeance at last for years of silence and repression.

"You—have—my—secret," she said slowly and distinctly. "What need to tell me that? I do not fear its betrayal any longer. You may use it as you please."

Sister Maria drew back, pale with anger and amazement. Was this weapon to be powerless now? What had come to the woman whose law she had been, whose conscience she had scourged?

"I will take you at your word," she said vindictively. "To-morrow I shall be at Dornbach. The good people there will be glad to know at last the

true history of the proud and virtuous Anna von Waldstein."

Then the door closed. Anna von Waldstein stood there erect and disdainful; listening to the echo of retreating steps; feeling as if the whole fabric of her life were falling in ruins around her.

A strange look came into her eyes. Was it fear or defiance? It might have been both, though the proud heart beat so steadily, though the calm face neither paled, nor flushed with emotion.

Slowly she dropped on her knees once more, her clasped hands raised to heaven.

The uplifted eyes grew dim with blinding tears; the quivering lips were rent with agonised sighs; the proud breast throbbed with sobs that nothing could control or restrain. Never in all the hours of agony through which she had passed, had Anna von Waldstein touched the supreme point of agony and despair as she touched it now.

Yet the iron force of will and self-control came to her aid even in this terrible hour. The storm died away, the tears ceased to flow, the passionate sobs no longer racked the tortured breast. White, calm, resolute, she rose at last and faced the duty upon which she had resolved.

With her own hands she arranged the disordered room, smoothing the bed, replacing the articles of clothing thrown so carelessly about. Then she closed the press and locked it; drew down the blind; went downstairs and called the old serving-woman to her.

"Your mistress has gone away for a time," she said quietly. "But she is coming back again with me. You will take care of the house and keep it as it is, ready for her at any time. Do you understand?"

"Ay, I understand," grumbled the old woman. "Strange enough goings on there be here, that I'm fain to say. But I know my duty, and I'll do it when I'm bid—have no fear of that, mistress."

"That is well," was the answer; and Anna von Waldstein turned away, and took her cloak and

bonnet from the stand in the hall and put them on mechanically.

She stood for a moment or two on the threshold lost in thought.

A strange light and radiance were on her face as she lifted it to the cold gray sky. Her lips moved, and one breathless, voiceless prayer went up to heaven which surely might have won response.

Then she went forth, resolute and calm, on the first stage of that journey she had set herself, neither hastening nor faltering, unknowing its end, yet determined in its purpose. A lonely figure in a sad, cold world, indifferent to all save individual concerns.

A lonely figure, holding a dread beyond all words in its beating heart; a yearning dumb and tearless, yet full of pathos, in the mournful eyes in which all pride was quenched.

A figure which through the long, dark, stormy day, pursued its quest with patient and untiring zeal, yet all without result; a figure which stood trembling and solitary still, in the glow of the stormy sunset, gazing with terrified eyes at the sluggish waters of the river, creeping away between the low, flat lines of shore.

What secret did it whisper as the dusk crept on apace, and the mysterious current flowed silently by into the mist and gloom of the falling night? What voice, stealthy as its own murmur, floated to the ear of the lonely watcher, to deepen her despair, to weight anew with agonised remorse the once proud heart?

What memories rose like winged shapes, and crowded thick and fast about that quiet bank, peopling it with mysterious shadows, impalpable, voiceless, yet clear and terrible to the watcher, who gazed down, always down, where the murky waters flowed?

Shapes of childhood, tender and appealing; a little figure flitting to and fro amidst grim and desolate rooms; a laugh like music; the fragment of a

song; eyes closed in the innocence of a child's slumbers. Then they changed, those strange shadows, and a girl's appealing face looked back from them; a young life martyred and condemned found voice of reproach, and sighed to the desolate air: "No one loves me, or desires me." . Oh, to recall those years! Oh, to hold the childish head to her bosom, and pour out love unchecked and unconstrained to the desolate young heart!

But Fate, relentless as Doom, pointed with iron finger onwards to the Future, regardless of remorse that came too late for atonement.

And the sun went down on the darkness of that miserable day, shedding no light on the mystery and darkness of Gretchen's fate.

# Book VI.

## CHAPTER I.

### A CLERICAL DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

Adrian Lyle could find no clue to Gretchen's hiding-place, nor any trace of where she had gone on leaving the cottage. She had not been seen in the village, nor at the little station; neither did any one appear to have met her on the roads about.

The growing fear in his mind gradually usurped all other thoughts, and he at last applied to the local police; they, in turn, applied to the higher authorities of the neighbouring town, with the result that Gretchen's description was telegraphed from place to place, and notable police officials made themselves extremely busy over researches that always ended in nothing.

Adrian Lyle had spent two days in these endeavours. The third would be a Sunday, and he knew that he must be at his post. He took the last train back to Medehurst, which he reached about five o'clock in the morning, pale, unwashed, unshaven, with dull, blank eyes, and haggard face—the face of a man stricken by a great calamity.

Wearied out by the long strain, he threw himself on his bed, and slept from pure exhaustion. It was ten o'clock when he awoke, and the sun was streaming into his room, and bringing with its mocking light the hard, inevitable memory of the sorrow which he had undergone; of anxiety and suspense to be

taken up; of duties to be fulfilled, and that right speedily, for in one hour he must be in his place in church.

The services of cold water and hot tea in some degree braced his physical energies, and gave him strength and courage for what he felt would be an ordeal in more ways than one.

The bells were sounding as he took his way through the churchyard and entered the vestry, but they seemed to be ringing in a dull, far-off way; and with sheer mechanical instinct he adjusted his surplice.

While he was thus engaged, the Rector entered. His brow was clouded; dissatisfaction and annoyance manifested themselves in every line of his august visage. He deigned not to notice his curate's outstretched hand, but only honoured him with a cold, curt nod.

"Mr. Lyle," he said, "I really must express displeasure—very great displeasure—at your late eccentric conduct. I cannot allow these constant and mysterious absences; and I've heard—I've——"

"Yes?" said Adrian Lyle quietly, as he paused.

"I have heard," resumed the Rector, in his usual pompous fashion, "that these absences are—ahem—not unconnected with a lady. Is that true?"

"Quite true," answered the young man, looking steadily back at his inquisitor.

"Quite true?" echoed Mr. Bray in astonishment. "But this must be explained. I cannot allow the suspicion of any scandal to attach itself to my church, or to any one connected with it."

"I was not aware," said Adrian Lyle, "that there was any question of scandal. Pray what have I done?"

"Can you assure me that this—this person is what she represents herself? Is she really married? My informant says—not."

"I do not see why I should insist upon seeing a marriage certificate before visiting a lady who is in great mental affliction, and is utterly friendless and alone." answered Adrian Lyle, with darkening brow

In his heart he thought: "So my enemy has been here also."

"Tut, tut," said Mr. Bray, "you are merely shirking the question. Of course, I know that you are comparatively a young man, but I thought you too upright and honourable to dally with—ah—temptation. Your constant absences, your changed looks, your indifference to your duties, all seem to me most reprehensible."

"My absences," said Adrian Lyle, "I have explained; duty and friendship exacted them. My looks are surely my own affair, and you cannot ask me to account to you for them. As for my duties, I scarcely think that you can say I have neglected anything but a little extra work which was voluntarily undertaken, and which I am not bound to perform unless I see fit."

"We are told," said Mr. Bray, "to abstain from even appearance of evil. Now you must promise me to give up these visits, and then we will say no more about it. There can be no great sacrifice in doing so, and——"

"I beg your pardon," said Adrian Lyle coldly. "With all due deference to you, I must say that I own no obedience on such a purely personal matter. Neither is this the time or place to enter upon such a discussion."

"As to that," interposed the Rector angrily, "it is my affair. You appear to forget that you are accountable to me—most certainly accountable in a matter that—that——"

"Has thrown a little extra duty in your way?" inquired Adrian Lyle.

"Sir, your levity is unbecoming — most unbecoming. I have been most grossly deceived in you."

"I am sorry," said Adrian Lyle, growing very pale, "you have said that. But, if my conduct is not satisfactory, you have your redress."

"And I shall take it," said Mr. Bray wrathfully. "I shall report you to the Bishop. You are not in favour with him, and——"

"And you are," said Adrian Lyle quietly.

"Excuse me for reminding you that the organ has ceased. Had we not better finish our conversation after service?"

A moment later he was following his superior in office, and the two white-robed figures took their accustomed places, as though no angry thought or word had ever disturbed their composure.

It was, strange to say, not until he advanced to read the first lesson that the memory of Alexis Kenyon flashed swiftly to the mind of Adrian Lyle. As it did so, he involuntarily raised his eyes and looked straight at the Abbey pew.

She was there. As the beautiful face looked back to his own, a sudden flush rose to his pale cheek as the sight of it brought back their last meeting and all that had occurred since. The flush, the sudden tremor in the deep, rich voice, were not lost on Alexis. Her heart gave a swift throb. She told herself that it was triumph; but something strangely like pain mingled with that triumph, and, for a moment, the words she heard had no meaning, and she only found herself saying:

"To think it should have been so easy after all."

That changed face bore only the interpretation of her own vanity; she could not read it by any other light. She had vowed that he should care as others had cared, and for as little purpose. True, he had never spoken the words that would have sealed her triumph; had never given her the satisfaction of rejecting him; but, all the same, the shock and horror he had so plainly shown on hearing of her engagement said quite as plainly what she had wanted him to say. A little gleam of warmth came into her eyes, as that look bridged the space between them.

She found herself wishing vaguely that her father had not made that stupid blunder; that Neale's letter had not arrived at a moment so inopportune. Things had been going on so pleasantly. Those long interviews; those eager discussions, wherein his zeal had held combat with her scepticism, had been quite charming in their way. And now there was an end.

Of course there would be an end. Men were so stupid. They always stopped short at the first stumbling-block.

She leant back amongst the cushions of her pew; her eyes were half closed; a little dreamy smile was on her mouth. She listened to his voice: its deep, bell-like notes, its sonorous rhythm, how pleasant they were! She had never heard one like it—never. Somehow she told herself that she never would. It had the same individuality about it as had Adrian Lyle himself, and she had never found any one like him in all her wide experience of human nature.

Yet, whatever satisfaction the service held for her that morning was doomed to be cut short by news that reached her during the day.

The Rector had dismissed Adrian Lyle with startling abruptness, and he was leaving Medehurst at once.

Alexis heard this with ill-concealed disgust. Never till that moment had she realised what an important part Adrian Lyle had played in her life of late; how great a blank his absence would make.

It seemed to her impossible that he should go so long as she desired him to remain. The possibility of his doing so chagrined and irritated her all the more, in that she was powerless to control his actions any longer.

She was too proud to send for him, and he seemed equally too proud to come unbidden. But she had expected his return; expected some question or remonstrance as to that suddenly announced engagement; and the fact that none came, seemed to her almost an affront.

She had desired more than she had gained. She had wished to behold the full and complete surrender of this calm and well-balanced nature; to feel that her influence had superseded its moral force, and held him, his interests and pursuits, at her mercy.

He had left her so abruptly that she had almost looked forward to his return, had pictured her very greeting and his reply; and now all her illusions were abruptly dispelled, and he had formed a plan of

action which she had never expected, and could still less oppose.

The following morning, a hundred vague rumours were afloat in the parish. "Adrian Lyle had quarrelled with the Rector." "The Rector had dismissed Adrian Lyle." "Something very much to the younger man's discredit had been discovered." "There had been hot words between them, and the result was conclusive;" and so on. Adrian Lyle was a general favourite, and his projected departure a great grief to many. But he himself offered no explanation, beyond stating the bare fact; and some thought that he seemed relieved at the idea, and some that he was regretful; but all soon joined in one conclusion, and that was, that the Rector was extremely indignant about it, and spoke in no measured terms of his subordinate's obstinacy and defiance towards himself.

Towards the evening of that Monday, whilst Alexis Kenyon was sitting in her own boudoir, in one of her most petulant and discontented moods, her maid came to the door and informed her that Bari was below and wished to speak to her.

Surprised at the information, and feeling certain that the man must have a special object for so unusual a request, Alexis bade the woman bring him to her room.

When the door opened and the dark smooth face of the Italian looked back at her own, she simply motioned him to advance.

"You have something to say to me?" she questioned with the old haughtiness.

"Yes," said the man gravely.

"Well?" she demanded. "I am waiting to hear it—though at a loss to imagine why you have come to me instead of to my father."

"I have come to you, Mademoiselle," he said, "because my news concerns you. You know that I was Mr. Kenyon's confidential servant when his sight was in so critical a condition."

"I am aware of that," she said. "Is it necessary to pay a formal visit to me to recall it?"

"During that period," the man continued suavely, "I became aware of a certain passage in Mr. Kenyon's life——"

"I have no wish," interposed the girl proudly, "to be made acquainted with any of Mr. Kenyon's secrets. If you have only come here with the intention of betraying one, I must request you to withdraw."

"Pardon, Mademoiselle—it will soon be a secret no longer, and I think it only due to you that you should hear the truth of the matter from its right source, ere rumour brings it you with a different interpretation."

Alexis leant back in her chair with an air of complete indifference as to rumour, or what it might choose to convey. She made no other answer, and Bari proceeded:

"At Vienna, in the early part of last spring, Mr. Kenyon became acquainted with a young German girl who lived in the next house. She was very young and very ignorant, and about her birth and history was a certain amount of mystery which no one had succeeded in penetrating. She was left very much to herself; time hung heavily on Mr. Kenyon's hands; and—well, Mademoiselle may suppose there was the usual result. Nothing serious would have come of it—nothing but a few walks in the woods, a few talks and meetings in the early mornings—had not circumstances arisen which threatened to turn jest into earnest. The young lady was destined for a convent, and——"

"You must excuse my interrupting you," said Alexis, in her coldest and haughtiest voice. "But again I must say that I have not the slightest desire to know anything of my cousin's affairs, or of his actions in the past."

"And again I must beg of Mademoiselle ten thousand pardons, and request her to have patience but a moment more, and she will see that my reason for telling her this is serious," answered Bari. "To resume, then—Monsieur leaves Dornbach and the young lady; but the young lady has no relish for

convent discipline, and one fine morning she is not to be found. She has followed Monsieur Kenyon and thrown herself on his protection."

Alexis was sitting quite still now, only her face had grown colder and more contemptuous in its silent scorn.

"Monsieur was in a dilemma, but what could be done? He could not send the girl back to her convent he permitted her to accompany him, and they went to Venice. It was at Venice they met the Signor Lyle."

Alexis was on her guard now; but she felt the hot blood fly to her cheeks as she heard that name, and she opened a small hand-screen which lay by her side, and held it between her face and the flames on the broad hearth.

"The Signor Lyle," resumed Bari, "took a deep interest in the young lady. He taught her English; he, I believe, did his best also to convert her to his own faith. They were much together, and Mr. Kenyon—his affections being in no way entangled—did not object to the intimacy. In Rome they parted, to the best of my belief, and I heard no more of the—the young lady who objected to convents until—Mademoiselle will excuse my plain speaking—until I discovered accidentally that she was living at a village some distance from here, under the protection of——"

Alexis looked up sharply; her face had grown very pale.

"Of Mr. Lyle," concluded Bari, with unmoved composure.

"And what," she asked, with cold disdain, "has this to do with me?"

"It may help to put Mr. Kenyon's conduct straight before you," said Bari. "For Mr. Lyle has skilfully contrived to hide his own weakness under the cloak of Monsieur's name and identity."

"What!" cried Alexis, rising breathless and amazed from her chair, and confronting him with incredulous eyes.

"It is true, Mademoiselle, I grieve to say, and Mr. Bray, the good Rector here, has at last dis-

covered it; and so angry is he at such a scandalous proceeding that he has dismissed Mr. Lyle from his duties, and is about to represent the affair to the Bishop himself. Now Mademoiselle will understand my reason for giving her the truth of the story, that she may be forewarned when the scandal really breaks out, and I fear it must do so soon."

"It cannot affect me," said Alexis proudly. "It is only a piece of my cousin's folly in the first instance; as for the sequel——"

"Ah, it is the sequel Mademoiselle has yet to hear," said Bari, dropping his voice and coming a step nearer to the calm and haughty figure. "The unfortunate girl has been missing for some days. Mademoiselle will remember that Mr. Lyle went suddenly away on one of his mysterious journeys, and returned only yesterday in time for service. That journey was to find out what had become of her. He was not successful. This morning, however, he has heard of her discovery in addition to his own disgrace."

"Where is she?" asked Alexis with effort, though still the calmness and coldness of her face betrayed no sign of what was raging in her heart.

Bari's eyes drooped, as if to conceal the flash of triumph which leapt from his soul. His voice shook with pretended emotion.

"Mademoiselle, I grieve to have to tell you. I scarce know how to frame so dreadful a truth; but, if I speak not, others will. The poor girl is in prison at E—— on a charge of child-murder!"

## CHAPTER II.

### "DECEIVED!"

THE room was empty again—it had been empty for a long time—and yet Alexis Kenyon did not seem to realise the fact.

She had dismissed Bari with that proud guard still on her face and voice which left him utterly in the dark as to how she had taken his information. She was far too much a woman of the world to pretend to any false delicacy. The history of this German girl was only to her a history like many others—folly, sin, betrayal. Her fate did not waken one throb of pity, one thought of compassion; far otherwise, it raised a fierce and savage joy in her breast. It seemed as the sweetness of a revenge which she would long to take for an indignity, an insult, the like of which had never approached her serene and haughty life.

"And I believed in him," she said to herself. "I thought, for once, that I had found truth, honour, single-heartedness; and, after all, he is no greater, no better than any of the fools, who run after a girl's face and allow themselves to be the slaves of their passions."

Her own face grew dark and stormy; her lips set themselves in one hard line; a sudden flame of rage caught her soul, and melted all the icy coldness and indifference on which she had so prided herself—melted it as snow before fire. Her brow flushed, her bosom heaved, the slender stem of the screen in her hand snapped, and shattered, and fell in a score of fragments at her feet. She to be duped, and tricked, and deceived! She, who had so prided herself on her clear-sightedness, her unerring judgment! She who had cheated her heart with the fancy that this man loved her, and who now, in the very hour of her triumph, learnt that he had all the time been prosecuting a disgraceful amour!

As each moment passed, the bitterness of her shame

and the jealous fury of her anger deepened and increased.

For it was jealousy which touched her with its brand of fire—jealousy which, for the first time in her life of selfish caprice, dragged her from her high pedestal, and held her bound by the common fetters of common lives.

She was no wiser, no surer, no better treated than any groom's wife or village girl among her own people. She had been so certain that he cared for her—so certain—and now——!

Her fierce Russian blood boiled in her veins and flushed her cheek. She remembered the intercourse of those past months, and every word he had spoken seemed to stand out in letters of flame, and condemn him as base, ignoble, hypocritical; all that she most hated, all that she could least excuse. He had deceived her, even her! Her pride reeled and fell into the dust of secret shame as she confessed it, and as she thought of her own blindness; of the miserable intrigue carried on so skilfully; of a rival, whom her inmost soul despised; of the guilt and horror now heaped upon his life, and of him who she had once told herself was as a king among men—a man worthy to be loved and trusted with all that was worthiest and best in the heart which he might win.

The pain and the insult maddened her; yet she sat on there still as any statue, but humiliated as a queen dethroned, a lovely figure, and yet a most miserable one.

She sat on without heed of time; when her maid knocked to ask if she would dress for dinner, she answered impatiently that she had a headache, and would not come down; that she wished to be undisturbed; and her moods were too well known in the household for any one to venture near her until she should herself summon them.

An hour passed—two hours—three hours—yet she did not move. As the third struck, a faint and timid knock aroused her. She answered it impatiently, almost fiercely. It was her maid again, with a message.

Hearing it through the closed door, she was told that Mr. Lyle was below, and wished to know if he could see her for a few moments on business of the greatest importance.

The girl started to her feet, too amazed and indignant for speech.

"He wished to see Sir Roy," continued the maid; "but he had gone out on hearing that you would not be downstairs that evening. Mr. Lyle,. therefore, begged me to ask you to grant him this interview. He would not have asked it, had it not been necessary and of the deepest importance."

Alexis stood there, her hand pressed to her heart, whose wild throbs almost hurt her; her eyes dilated with anger; a fierce, incredulous joy thrilling her veins.

That he should ask for her, seek her presence voluntarily, seemed a thing so strange that she could scarcely credit it. A moment—then she unlocked the door, and bade the maid attend to her fire and alter the shade of the lamp, while she herself swept into the adjoining dressing-room and looked at herself from head to foot with the merciless scrutiny that once before had characterised her personal survey.

All the tumultuous feelings of the past hours had added to, rather than detracted from, her strange beauty. The flush on her cheeks, the feverish brilliance of her eyes, the loosely ruffled hair on her brow, only made her lovelier for the warmth and richness of colouring they lent her usual statue-like calm. She took a deep yellow rose from a vase near at hand, and placed it amidst the laces at her breast, and gave one glance at the graceful, sweeping folds that fell around her like an opal cloud. Then she passed on and entered her boudoir again, calm and proud as a young queen who gives audience to an erring subject.

"You may bring Mr. Lyle here," she said coldly, and seated herself in the long low chair, to all appearance as calm and indifferent as ever. Her eyes fell on the broken fragments of the screen which she had held, and with a sudden sense of

previous disadvantage, she took another from the carved mantel-shelf and laid it on her lap.

"Why does he come?" she asked herself, and the rose in her bosom trembled with its rapid pulsations. "Why? Is it to defend himself? Does he think to fool me again?"

"Mr. Lyle," announced the maid.

Alexis looked up as the door closed on her visitor. What he saw in her face she did not know; but the hand which he had half-extended dropped at his side, and he simply bowed in answer to her cold greeting.

"I am sorry," he said, "to intrude upon you, Miss Kenyon, but the matter is urgent, and Sir Roy is from home. I cannot wait for his return, as I leave here in an hour."

"Indeed," she said curtly. "And what is the urgent matter, Mr. Lyle?"

The blood flushed his pale cheek with momentary warmth. Only now, when he looked on that proud face, when he heard that calm and chilling voice, did he realise how difficult his task might be.

"Miss Kenyon," he said hesitatingly, "you told me, on the last occasion of our meeting, that you were engaged to be married to your cousin, Neale. You must have seen that the information affected me strangely."

She slowly opened the screen, and began to wave it to and fro with languid and indifferent grace. That momentary hesitation, that look from his haggard eyes, thrilled her heart anew. Was she to have her triumph, after all?

Seeing that she did not answer, he resumed: "I was affected, indeed—more than that. I received a painful shock at that announcement, for I knew that your cousin must have wantonly deceived you, or that he stood condemned in the sight of all honourable men as a dishonoured scoundrel!"

"My cousin is not here to defend himself," she said coolly, "and I am not accustomed to such very

violent language. Perhaps you will give me the reasons for your—abuse?"

"The reasons," he said impetuously, "are these. When I met him in Venice, he represented himself to me as a married man. When I met him here—months afterwards—he again repeated that statement. I had the honour of knowing the young lady, whom he represented as his wife. To know her was to know and admire purity and beauty of nature and person, in its highest and most perfect form. I did not doubt his word or his honour, and he gave me excellent reasons for his keeping the marriage secret. You may understand, therefore, how amazed I was, when I heard from your own lips that he was engaged to you, and that you were contemplating a speedy union."

He looked at her intently. The screen lay idly in her lap. Her face was calm and unmoved as ever. She languidly adjusted a cushion, and leant back with indolent grace, while her eyes looked up to his with a cynical coldness and disbelief which startled him more even than her words.

"Are you telling me a romance?" she said. "I assure you that it does not interest me at all. I am quite aware of my cousin's little idyl. It is only on a par with all other follies of manly youth. But you, surely, are not so credulous as to believe your version of the tale, or suppose that my cousin would dare to offer me such an insult as your words imply?"

"Do you mean to say," cried Adrian Lyle hoarsely, "that you don't believe what I have told you—that you doubt my word?"

"I mean to say," she answered, quite unmoved, "that I never listen to tales behind any one's back. I am quite aware of this—person's—existence. I am aware also of the part which she has played in my cousin's life and in yours. But the story of the pretended marriage is a piece of folly which I never expected to hear from you; and I marvel not only at your want of good taste in repeating such a story to me, but at your pretence of crediting it yourself."

The words were so contemptuous, so unwomanly,

that, as he listened to them, Adrian Lyle felt the very blood tingle in his veins. A dark flush rose to his brow; his eyes flashed back to hers the deepest scorn that ever any man's eyes had dared to give her.

"Miss Kenyon," he said—and there was a ring of power and command in his voice which held her even against her will—"you have offered me the deepest insult that one human being can offer to another. Were your cousin here at this moment, he would not dare to deny what I have said."

"He is not here," interposed Alexis coolly. "And you have it all your own way, Mr. Lyle. He will soon be back, however, and able to defend himself. I leave it to your own good taste to refrain from further particulars of this not very creditable romance. It has neither interest nor amusement for me, I assure you."

Her eyes met his own with a challenge of defiance. He knew then that all his faith, his honesty, his courage, were impotent to move her, to win her belief, to waken her sympathy; and he felt a fierce anger at himself for having come to her with a tale, at which she only mocked and jeered; with the pathetic story of that broken life which could never interpose itself now between her and the cold caprice that had been its ruin.

Then suddenly his face grew warm. A burning light leaped into his eyes. He crossed the space and stood before her, majestic as an avenging angel, holding her cold and selfish pride checked and silent by the might and strength of conscious truth.

"As truly as there is a heaven above us," he said solemnly, "you shall hear me, whether you affect to disbelieve or not; what I have told you is true—every word of it. Neale Kenyon won this child away from her home by specious promises, all of which he has broken. How could she tell she was deceived? A girl of sixteen, as ignorant of the world and of men as a baby. He has sworn to me that she was his wife. She never doubted it herself—never till the day that brought his letter to you. When I heard what that letter contained, and you

confirmed it, I went to her. I found her despairing, heart-broken, all the youth and faith and glory of her life shattered at one cowardly blow—a sight to wring any man's heart, to soften any woman's. I could do nothing. Consolation was not to be found for a calamity so overwhelming—a calamity which her youth and innocence made ten times more pathetic. Long, long ago I promised to be her friend, if ever she should need one; but what could any friend do for her in such an hour of agony? Maddened with despair and grief she has fled from the only home she knew—the home which your cousin provided for *his wife*, and where she has lived under that name ever since he left for India. I have lost all trace of her. It is three days since she left her shelter. In her distraught and broken-hearted state, Heaven alone knows what may not be her fate ere now. Then I took the desperate resolve of appealing to you, for as she knows your name, and knows that you are to be Neale Kenyon's wife, it may be that she will find her way here. In any case, you know now the character of the man you are about to wed, and, whether you defy the better impulses of your nature or not, you can no longer accept him in ignorance. I have sworn to befriend this girl at any cost; and if her fate demands it, the world shall know Neale Kenyon's villainy as I know it. Will you, at your own risk and peril, give your good name into his keeping?"

She sat there quite still and silent beneath the breathless torrent of those passionate words.

As they ceased she slowly rose and confronted him.

"You have told me your version of this story," she said, "now listen to mine. Is it only *friendship* that has made you so keen a champion of this interesting heroine? Have you indeed played so blameless a part with regard to her and her 'unprotected' condition? What of your own visits to her? Your mysterious absence and illness, when she played the part of ministering angel? What of the rumour which credits you with being the 'Mr.

Kenyon' whose personality you are kind enough to foist on to my cousin's shoulders? There are two sides to every tale; I cannot give the verdict to either as yet; but——"

She stopped. The disgust and horror of his face stayed further insults, though she was then in the mood to heap one on another unsparingly.

"I don't know," he said hoarsely, "how you can bring yourself, as a woman, to insinuate facts so disgraceful. They are below contempt. I should scorn myself, did I attempt to answer them or defend one single action which you have so grossly misinterpreted. I see now whom I have to thank for being beforehand with me. Your spy has acquitted himself most creditably, and I congratulate you on having kept his services in the family. Further discussion is needless, I see. Your sex has given you the privilege of insinuating what no man would have dared to do."

A faint smile curved her lips.

"You can be melodramatic out of the pulpit as well as in," she said. "It is a great art, but you had better reserve its uses for my cousin. It will be interesting to know what he has to say on the matter; and excuse my remarking that it would have been better taste to have kept the subject for his ears, or—my father's."

She bowed coldly as a sign of dismissal.

"You have wilfully misconstrued my motives," he said. "Before I go, will you tell me if you believe that I have spoken the truth of this matter? Leaving future intentions out of the question, I have a right to demand that."

Her eyes dilated. There was the vibration of intense passion, subdued and held in check, but dangerous withal, in her clear, low voice, as she answered:

"If you swore it on the Faith and Order you profess, I would not believe you! A priest is but a man *when he loves,* and you must think me very blind that I have not discovered your secret ere this."

His face paled to the hues of death. For a moment

his heart seemed to stop beating, and he turned sick and dizzy with the overmastering power of long-restrained emotion.

Then he looked at her with one last look of horror and disgust, and left her presence without another word.

She, left alone, listened to the echo of his steps with a strange, feverish delight. "I have hurt him," she cried to herself in a savage, breathless way. "It was all I could do—all I could do. Oh, how I hate that girl! To think that I have let myself be so blind, so deluded, and that all the time it was for her he cared—for her! never for me, never one single moment of his life for me!"

Then she sank down slowly on the soft white furs at her feet, and hid her face in her hands in a sudden, torturing humiliation which filled her soul with horror, the like of which had never yet touched her brilliant, capricious life!

Adrian Lyle had his revenge then, little as he guessed or desired it.

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## CHAPTER III.

### "THE PITY OF IT."

As the mists of anger, jealousy, and wounded pride cleared away slowly and gradually from Alexis Kenyon's brain, she woke suddenly to the memory that Adrian Lyle had apparently not yet learned the tragic sequel to the story which she had heard from Bari.

He had spoken of Gretchen's fate as still unknown, and had hinted that she might even be desperate enough to present herself at the Abbey. The thought brought the blood to her face in a sudden tide of indignation and yet of fear.

She knew well enough that truth had spoken in

every line of Adrian Lyle's face, in every ring of the deep and passion-filled voice. She knew now equally well that Bari had lied—that Neale's weak and yielding nature was alone responsible for this catastrophe, and that on his head the blame must lie. But her keen eyes had read the truth of that one assertion, which she had hurled at Adrian Lyle so contemptuously; she felt that he loved this girl, that her fate meant to him his life's weal or woe; and that knowledge stung her pride and self-sufficiency to the very core.

When she raised herself from the white furs on which she had thrown herself in the first agony and shame of her wounded heart, her face looked ghastly and almost terrible. She began to pace the room to and fro like a caged creature in its den. The delicate lace handkerchief she held in her hand was rent and bitten into a thousand fragments. It was the only outlet she had dared allow the hysterical passions which had threatened to overwhelm her.

Again and again she told herself that she despised Neale Kenyon, that she hated Adrian Lyle; but one thing she scarcely dared even whisper, and that was the fierce, unholy joy which the knowledge of her rival's shame and suffering brought with its every recollection. Her rival! It was humiliating, but it was true—her rival in the affections of the only two men whom she had ever permitted to hope for favour or regard!

She, who had so prided herself on her power; who had smiled with such unmoved serenity on the follies and passions of men, she was rivalled now by the mere youth and beauty of this low-born German girl of whose very name she was ignorant!

The thought seemed incredible, and for a time she could scarcely realise its truth.

The shame and disgust, which she had always felt for the intrigues of men, overwhelmed her now with a sense of personal affront and of outraged dignity.

Neale might have done what he liked so long as the knowledge of his actions had not offended her taste, or affected her personally. But he had blun-

dered in the most helpless fashion; he had been capable of the stupidity of giving his own name to be used against him; and he had also committed that last and crowning folly—trusting an inferior, and lying to a rival.

Her rage was less bitter than her contempt for the miserable blunderer to whom she had promised herself. Surely he might have had the decency to keep the girl in her own land; to fence the matter off with some sure barriers; not to leave all to the mercy of chance and the zealous watchfulness of the man whom he had deceived.

Adrian Lyle's words echoed in her ears with strange persistence. The matter would not rest now, she felt assured. If what Bari had told her was true, the whole country would ring with the scandal, and Adrian Lyle's testimony would be weighty indeed.

At this point of her reflections she rang the bell to summon her maid, and asked whether her father had returned. The girl answered that Sir Roy had just come in, and was in the library.

Alexis asked no more, but went straight down to the room in question, and entered it as unceremoniously as usual. The first glance at her father's face told her he had heard the news. Some one had been beforehand with her.

She stopped abruptly.

"You—you know?" she faltered, touched and vaguely alarmed by the haggard misery of his face. "Who told you?"

"Bari," he said. Then he held out his arms to her; his eyes softened with the idolising tenderness of the love which she had so sorely tried, yet had never found wanting. "Oh, my poor child!" he said, "my poor child!"

These words touched the girl's proud heart, as nothing else could have touched it in that moment when all that was worst in her nature had asserted its power. For a moment she stood before him erect, haughty, defiant; but then the weakness of womanhood asserted itself; she shuddered from head to foot; great tears sprang to her eyes, and she hid her

face on that fond and faithful heart, sobbing like a wearied child.

"We must do something," said Sir Roy, at last.

That sudden and unusual storm of weeping had exhausted the girl's strength. She lay back in her chair, white and fragile as a lily. No one, looking at her, would have credited her with the force and fury of the passions which had raged within her breast an hour before.

At her father's words she looked up inquiringly.

"What can we do?" she said. "There is the scandal—the shame—how can they be avoided now?"

"If it is true," said Sir Roy, "if the girl really is in prison, I have made up my mind to go and see her. For the honour of common humanity she must be saved, if it is possible to save her."

"You will go and see her?" echoed Alexis, looking with strange and incredulous eyes at his face.

"I must," said Sir Roy. "Keenly as I feel the disgrace, the girl is perhaps less to blame than we imagine. As for Neale's share in the business, Bari has so complicated and mixed it up with Mr. Lyle's that I find it hard to make out who is the most guilty. You have heard, of course, that Lyle has left here?"

"I heard it," she said, growing very pale, "from himself."

"From himself! Do you mean to say he has had the audacity to enter this house—to ask for you——"

She made a gesture of impatience.

"What does it matter?" she said. "He asked for you, but you were out. I—I had a natural curiosity to find out whether his version of the story tallied with Bari's, so—I saw him."

"And what did he say?" demanded Sir Roy, his brow growing stormy once again.

"He painted Neale in very black colours. For my part, I thought the story very weak, and I told him that I should wait for Neale's version before believing him."

"But Neale is bound hand and foot out in Madras," exclaimed Sir Roy. "He can't possibly come home, and the trial will be on at once—next week, I believe."

"So soon," faltered the girl. "Can't it be postponed, or evaded? You have influence, wealth——"

"Not enough to buy justice," said her father with a bitter smile. "Things must take their course, you know. Bari told you her crime?"

"Yes," she said, a faint spot of colour coming in either cheek. "Is it true?"

"That I cannot say until I see her. But I fear it is only too probable."

"Why should she have done such a thing?" demanded Alexis. "There was nothing to be gained. She must have been mad, or——"

She stopped abruptly. Adrian Lyle's picture of the distraught, frenzied girl learning, for the first time, her betrayal and ruin, rose before her eyes. Surely here was confirmation enough of the tale he had told, and not only confirmation, but reason for the rash action which had suddenly overwhelmed so many lives in black and bitter shame.

"Perhaps," said Sir Roy, "she was mad. I pray to Heaven that she may have been. The guilt would be less terrible, though not the disgrace. That can never be wiped out if once our good name becomes public property."

He looked at his daughter as he spoke. To his amazement she was leaning back in her chair white and still as marble.

He sprang to his feet, and rang violently for assistance.

In all his experience of Alexis, he had never known her faint.

"Good Heaven!" he cried to himself in terror, as he watched her women's efforts to restore her. "Is it possible that she cared so much for Neale after all? . . And now, oh! the pity of it—the pity of it!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### "THROUGH BITTER WATERS."

A SOLITARY figure was pacing up and down the little lawn of Gretchen's English home, in the chill, gray morning light.

The wind swept coldly over the trees; the sky was overcast and sad. To and fro, with hurried steps the figure paced; its black draperies sweeping the dry and rustling leaves that had fluttered earthwards; the face turned in dread and expectation to the little gate beyond. Suddenly it swung open, and a man entered. The figure stood still under the bare, dim trees, then made a step forward, looked, and shrank back, while all of life or feeling in the marble face lived only in the fevered questioning of the eyes.

For a second, face looked back to face—no word was uttered. Then the man's lips broke the chain of silence. "Have you found her?" he asked breathlessly; and the eager beating of his heart seemed to outrace his speech.

No answer.

"For Heaven's sake, speak," he cried hoarsely. "You have heard something. What is it? The worst is better than suspense."

"The worst?" fell slowly, brokenly, in that dull, changed voice. "It is the worst. Have you not heard?"

"I have heard nothing—would I be here else? What is it? Is she dead?"

The face he questioned was hidden from his sight; all self-control swept away in the bitter agony of such shame and such remorse, as never had his wildest fancy pictured.

"Dead! No. Heaven is less merciful than death!"

"Not dead?" There was relief, keen as joy, in the hoarsely whispered words. "Then, what has happened?"

"She is in prison—on a charge of murdering her child."

He fell back a step, his face drawn and ghastly as the dead. Slowly, distinctly, with clearness not to be gainsaid, had the words come to his ears. He could not doubt, he could not question. The whole force and horror of his own fears had never yet suggested to him such a possibility as this; but now he marvelled that they had not done so.

Maddened with shame and terror; burdened with misery too great to bear; could he wonder that despair had overthrown her reason, and left her at the mercy of the first mad impulse which had fired the poor distraught brain?

The terrible silence lasted but a brief space, though its agony might have crowded years.

The woman spoke again. "I did not believe it at first. I could not. Only last night I heard that she was in prison; then a man, some labouring man who knew her by sight, brought the news here. I only waited for the daylight to go to her. He told me the place, where they have taken her. I wrote it down for fear I might forget."

She took a folded paper from the bosom of her dress, and gave it to Adrian Lyle. He gazed at it blankly, stupidly, trying vaguely to connect it with the young, fair springtide of that wrecked and shattered life. She, so pure, so lovely, shrined in his heart as its most exquisite memory! she an accused criminal—condemned to the disgrace, the hardships of a prison cell!

He groaned aloud. Then suddenly he turned away, and began to walk mechanically down the path.

A voice stayed him. "Where are you going; not to her?"

"Yes," he said. "Where else?"

"Then take me with you. I must see her too; my coldness and cruelty drove her forth; on my head be the blame."

Adrian Lyle looked coldly at the agonised face.

"On your head it may be," he said; "but that plea will not save her now."

Then his voice broke, a passion of fear, of terror, shook from him the remainder of his self-control.

"Oh, to think of it," he groaned. "A little kindness, a word of sympathy; and she would be here now, safe, sheltered, even if unhappy."

"Don't reproach me," said his companion, and a sob burst from her tortured heart. "My cup is full enough. Only take me to her side; let me sob my secret and my sorrow at her feet; and then—I will pray Heaven for death."

He was silent for a moment, wrestling with bitter thoughts of anger and of blame. The pitiless hardness of this woman's nature had been the first lever which Fate had used to turn poor innocent Gretchen to her doom. That same harshness and rigour had driven her forth, in woman's greatest need and agony, to face the desolate future. He held it responsible for this new misfortune, and he felt for the woman beside him dislike so great, contempt so bitter, that no harder task could have been his than the one which she set before him in the light of courtesy and of duty. But, putting self aside, he mastered his own repugnance, and turned to her with grave and cold politeness:

"I am at your service," he said.

A dull, wide street in a dull, murky town; yet a busy town withal it seemed to Adrian Lyle, as he drove through it with that silent figure by his side. She had only looked up once as the carriage took its way, among noise and clamour, and hurrying vehicles and harsh voices, and all the bustle and confusion of busy life.

"Is it here?" she had asked, and Adrian Lyle had simply bent his head. Speech would not come, nor did she seem to expect it. The depth of a mutual sorrow, the agony of a mutual dread, these were all they had in common—a bond of union in the saddest hour that either life had known.

As the carriage rattled and jolted over uneven streets, it passed a black and frowning edifice, at sight of which Adrian Lyle involuntarily shrank back with paling lips and sudden horror-filled eyes.

"Dear Heaven!" his heart cried, "to think that she should be there—she——!"

They reached the hotel to which he had directed the man to take them, and he got out and secured rooms, and gave orders for his companion's comfort; and all the while the aching of his heart grew wilder and more fierce with every throb that spoke its mute despair.

The noon was scarcely past. There was ample time for him to fulfil his promise. Mechanically he took his way once more through the streets, and to that place of horror from whence his shuddering soul sank back in mortal dread.

Learning the hour at which the prisoner might be seen, and learning, too, that his profession gave him some privilege of frequent admission, he went back again to the hotel, true to his promise to Anna von Waldstein.

"At four o'clock," he said, "you may see her."

The white face, almost awful in its intensity of repressed suffering, looked up at him with sudden gratitude.

"You have been very generous," she faltered. "I will only ask one favour more at your hands. Be present at the interview. I have that to say which it is best for you to hear, you, the only true friend this poor forsaken child has ever known. Will you promise?"

There seemed in Adrian Lyle's heart no further place for surprise or suffering left. All of misery and mischance that could fill one man's life had surely filled his own. Yet he looked at the beautiful, suffering face with involuntary compassion; he gave her once again his courteous assent, but with that difficulty and distaste which marked it as an obligation and a duty.

"Yes," he said. "I promise."

## CHAPTER V.

### "THE SECRET OF SILENT YEARS."

Across the prison-court the fading light fell dim and wavering. Like one in a dream, Adrian Lyle noted it, and the dull hues of the sky, and the gloom of the long corridor into which he passed. So strange, so far away, so unreal, did everything appear that he seemed even to move by purely mechanical force, not by will or power of his own. A sound struck on his ear—the harsh, grating sound of a key in a lock. For a moment he felt the chill of a deadly fear, and shuddered from head to foot. Then the door fell behind him with a loud, sullen clang. The hand which till now had rested on his arm released its convulsive pressure. He saw before him a figure crouching with hidden face on a straw pallet; a figure indistinct and shadowy, on whose bowed head fell one faint ray of light from the narrow grating high above.

He could not move or speak, so great were the shock and the pain which seemed to come to him as at last he realised the horrors of Gretchen's surroundings. Breathless he leant against the door and watched the swift and silent movements of the woman whom he had brought to this dread place; a movement swift, impulsive, impassioned; yet not so swift or so impulsive as that which held her back and fenced her off with shuddering and repellent gesture; not so impassioned as the cry which rang out in the loneliness and silence of that miserable cell. Gretchen had sprung to her feet, and, like a wild thing at bay, stood gazing at the figure trembling there in its agony of humiliation.

"Why are you here?" she cried at last. Her very voice was changed. Its sweet, rich music sounded harsh and discordant, and her face—oh, what a face it was which, like the wreck of every

fair and joyous hope of youth, lifted itself among the chill, gray shadows, and, with despair beyond all words, spoke out its sad reproach! "Have you come to see your work?" she went on. "Why do you weep? You can't be sorry; you weren't sorry before, when I prayed to you for mercy and forgiveness."

"Oh, my child! my child!" burst forth in agonised accents. "Be merciful to me now. Every word of yours is like a sword thrust to my heart. I, at whose door lies this sin; I, who have deceived you all these years; I, whose life has been one long, long lie! Oh, forgive me if you can; forgive your guilty and unhappy mother!"

Frenzied hands clasped the girl's dress; wild tears streamed down the white uplifted face. The shame, and fear, and passion of those burdened years, took vengeance now on their long repression, and wailed out their terrible secret in broken, incoherent words; words to which the child, so long denied all rights and care of motherhood, listened in hard and stony silence; words, at which the man, standing motionless against that closed door, unseen and unremembered, shuddered and grew sick at heart.

Humiliation so intense, remorse so terrible, had never met his eyes; the mother suppliant to the child; the guilty secret of the one life, bearing such tragic fruits in that of the other; and worst and most pitiable of all was it to see how cold and stern was that young face; how relentless the once sweet and radiant eyes. Stony, calm, and unmoved, she listened to the miserable tale which gave at last the clue to a lonely and unloved childhood; which showed the mother's sin repeated with yet more tragic horror in the child's young life.

The voice ceased. The shamed and stricken woman lifted her head, and, amidst the gathering darkness, looked with one last imploring prayer to the face above. What did she see in it? What did that silent watcher by the door see in it? For both, by one common impulse, sprang forward, and then, as if transfixed by mortal terror, stood—waiting. They

could not have said for what—and yet it was less surprise than horror which fell with touch of icy dread on either heart, and kept them spell-bound, awe-struck, still as death.

For across the silence there broke a laugh—a laugh more terrible than the very doom it foretold.

"My—mother!" It was only a whisper, but never trumpet-call could have sounded more awful and distinct to the listeners' ears. "My mother!" And again that low and foolish laughter echoed in the dismal cell; and the girl herself drew back and crouched against the wall, holding her hands out as if to keep off the approach of the poor suppliant. "You must not come near me," she said in the same hushed, yet painfully distinct voice. "You do not speak the truth! My mother. Oh no—she is dead, dead and happy. A mother does not starve her child's heart; mine was starved and empty, and no one cared for me—until—ah yes, he cared. How pretty the woods are! Let us gather the wild flowers; but you cannot see. You are blind—well—I will lead you. It is so sad to be blind."

Her voice broke over those last words: she raised her hands and looked at them, and then at the kneeling figure shaken with a storm of bitter weeping.

"Why do you cry?" she said. "Have you, too, killed your child? Do you see my hands?—there is no blood on them. They say there is. But it is only the earth, the dark wet earth . . and the leaves. They were so cold . . . I wanted violets and daisies—my own name-flower that he loved and told me about in the spring woods. But there are no daisies now; and it is cold in the woods—oh so cold I think sometimes that the earth is over me too, but it is not deep enough oh, not nearly deep enough yet. You must tell them to put more over me, or I cannot rest."

She ceased abruptly, startled by a cry which rang out through the darkness of the prison cell—the cry of a strong man's agony.

"Great Heaven! Not this fate too! I cannot bear it!"

He crossed the space between them with one rapid stride. He seized her hands, and his eyes were reading the havoc that these miserable days had made in the haggard face, the blank dull eyes.

"Gretchen!" he cried wildly. "Gretchen, don't you know me?"

She turned her eyes to his in the gathering gloom. Then they wandered away and rested on the figure by the pallet. A strange, foolish little smile came to her lips.

"Send her away," she said. "She is not my mother. I do not want her." Then she crept closer to his side as a child who seeks shelter and protection. "Is your heart warm?" she said in a half-whisper. "Mine is so cold—oh, so cold. I think there is a stone there. . I wanted to place it on the grave above the leaves and the earth but I could not get it."

He dropped her hands and turned aside. Blinding tears filled his eyes. He could not see her face or anything else. It seemed as if the gloom and blackness of eternal night shut him out now from all that meant life and joy in a world barred by dreary prison-gates.

What had he hoped—what expected? Not this, he groaned in his heart. Anything—anything but this!

The woman at his feet arose. He could not see her face; the dusk had fallen rapidly; the last gleam of light from the dying day quivered and passed into the darkness of night; and the three, linked by such a chain of misery, stood side by side in that dreary cell, not speaking, scarcely even breathing; in each hand the cup of sorrow which Fate had willed that they should drink to its very dregs.

A sound of steps; the rattle of keys; Gretchen sank down again in the same attitude of dreary apathy. Not all Adrian Lyle's imploring words had drawn sign or answer from her lips.

When the turnkey opened the door, he summoned self-command to ask him of the girl's condition.

"Oh, she be right enough; she's only shamming," was the brutal rejoinder. "Thinks, maybe, that she'll get off easy. Bring her in 'temporary insanity,' you know. She's sensible enough when she likes."

Adrian Lyle shuddered with horror.

"For Heaven's sake," he implored, "be kind to her. She is so young, and has been delicately nurtured and cared for. To see her thus—in this miserable place——"

"Oh, as to that, I'll do what I can," returned the man more graciously. "'Tain't much as is allowed; but she wouldn't say anything as to who she was, or her friends, or aught o' that sort. Now I sees that she's respectable, we might move her to a better place, if so be you'd speak to the governor; or, maybe, you know one of the magistrates."

"No," said Adrian Lyle brokenly, "but I will call on one if you will give me his address."

"You can get that from the chaplain. Perhaps you'd like to see him; and I suppose," he added, "you're a-going to have her defended. There's not much time to lose. Case is coming on o' Friday."

"Yes," he said hurriedly, "I will see to that."

The woman at his side pressed his arm. "Take me home now," she said faintly. "I cannot bear more. It is too horrible."

Anna von Waldstein was not a weak woman. Far otherwise, indeed. She had been accounted very proud, cold, stern, impassive all her life; denying to herself that softness and mutability of temperament which is essentially feminine; excusing no weakness, because displaying none; and as little inclined to be compassionate to misfortune as to be self-indulgent to error.

Brought up with a rigour that was almost harsh, she had known but one love in her childhood's days, the love of her twin-sister. That love had been an influence gentle and humanising to both, and in a great measure had served to atone for the absence of other affection.

There had come a shadow on its brightness once,

but the gentler and more yielding nature had triumphed; true, staunch, and faithful as in the pledge of childish days it had vowed to be, that love had done battle for its gentle faith, and believed in its idol even when that idol had fallen in the mire and dust of a bitter shame.

Did the proud woman think of these things now, alone and keeping sorrowful vigil with despair, whose leaden hand pressed hard and sore upon her aching heart? Ay, that she did, passing in sorrowful and remorseful review all that had come and gone since first in girlhood's innocence and heedlessness, she had listened to the voice of a tempter, who had wrecked her life and poisoned all her future.

She had not realised for some time what it was she had done. He had seemed so generous, so brave, so true; and then, at last, when she had learned the truth —even then she had blamed circumstances, not him, not her lover, with the frank brow, and the bold laughing eyes, and the music of love in his voice.

Then came that black and awful time when Death laid his hand upon her life, and her child's cry alternately lifted her soul to heights of joy and dragged it down to depths of horror and despair. During all that time—faithful still when all looked faithless—that tender sister's voice had sounded in her ears; had whispered of hope and of forgiveness; had rescued her from the deep, dark waters that were closing overhead—rescued, and restored her, and in pure love and infinite pity, had shown her a way of escape, which, safe and almost innocent then, now looked but one long network of black and heartless deceit.

Her mother had died, her father was old and infirm, failing in sight and sense. What more easy than to utilise the marvellous likeness which had always existed between them!—a likeness which sorrow and suffering had deepened, until now the two faces were but a reflex of each other, and would have needed a keen eye to detect the younger from the elder, though, indeed, seniority was but a question of hours.

Anna von Waldstein had listened, hesitated, and then finally accepted the sacrifice. She was in

desperate case. Homeless, moneyless, with her child to support, and such a burden of shame upon her proud shoulders as even a stronger nature might have shrunk from bearing, how tempting looked the refuge offered! The home which, cold and loveless as it might be, was yet a place of shelter where none would know her shame, and where her child might be brought up under her own care.

The temptation had come to her again and again, urged by that faithful and self-sacrificing love, and at last hesitation ceased to parley; deception, boldly faced, looked less guilty.

Anna von Waldstein, the sinner, returned to her father's roof, bringing the tale of the erring sister's death, and demanding the shelter of that roof for the nameless orphan whom she had brought in her charge.

Marie von Waldstein, the innocent, entered a convent; and a year afterwards died, happy in the thought that her sister and her sister's child were safe, and the deception undiscovered.

The father had never suspected the cheat. The likeness between the two girls had always been so great that it had been very easy for Anna to identify herself with Marie, and, though a mother's keen eye might have read the subtle difference, the father, cast in harsh and sterner mould, failing in health and less keen of vision, never thought of questioning it.

Never could it have entered his head that a plot so daring, yet so simple of execution, could have been carried out so boldly under his very roof; and Gretchen, though denied all motherhood, yet grew up under a mother's care, knowing nothing of the love which was so sternly and harshly repressed, and ignorant of the dread and horror which surrounded her young years, and made every look, and smile, and question a thing of torture to that proud and suffering heart.

But a day came when the fabric of deceit so skilfully erected threatened to crumble in the dust. When eyes, long watchful and cruel in their silent suspicion, at last read the secret plainly enough, and boldly taxed Anna von Waldstein with the deed for which she had almost ceased to fear discovery. There had

been no questioning, no hinting, nothing but a bold assertion of facts, skilfully put together, carefully evolved, and at last complete.

Gretchen was but a year old when Anna von Waldstein learnt that her secret was in the hands of the stern and rigorous Sister whose iron hand had ruled her childhood; whom she hated, and feared, and yet obeyed, because the exactior of spiritual submission is the one creed which the Church of Rome most rigorously enforces; and this submission, wound lightly as a thread about her childish years, became in after-life a chain which fettered her limbs, and ate into her flesh, and turned every hour of existence to martyrdom and dread.

The truth once guessed, she was bidden to reveal it to her own confessor, and these two had never ceased to make her sin a living torture, and her child its hourly penance.

Not in any moment of self-forgetfulness could that most wretched mother hold her child to her heart, or breathe one word of the love which at times threatened to overflow the barriers of restraint. No natural affection, no tender words, no sunshine of secret and gentle sympathy had brightened the long, long road she had been forced to travel. What wonder that that proud veil of silence and indifference was drawn yet more closely round the stately figure; that nothing was left for the child to reach or claim, nothing that could bring them heart to heart in any hour of sorrow or compassion? Nothing, nothing, nothing!

Anna von Waldstein remembered all this now, and shuddered as the cold, dark hours dragged heavily along. The innocent had indeed suffered for the guilty. The agony of her soul was such that she would have welcomed death but too gladly, yet no such mercy could be hers. Beyond all hope, beyond all help, so looked her life henceforwards—dragging its guilty secret to the end, and beholding, afar off, yet near enough for dread unspeakable, the yet more terrible fate which she had called down upon her child's innocent head.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE STRAIN GROWS HARDER.

So fast had event crowded on event, so quickly had one calamity but foreshadowed another, that Adrian Lyle had scarce given a thought to the gravity of the charge against himself, a charge which he must answer, or else accept as a stigma of indelible disgrace.

He knew well enough the hand which had dealt it; the lips which had framed the lies repeated to his face by Alexis Kenyon; and he found himself inwardly wondering why Bari hated him so bitterly, and what his object could be in maligning his character as he had done.

That wonder brought back in some dim fashion the memory of that night in Venice, when the man's face had awakened a recollection in his mind too vague and undefined to be at once determined—a recollection which had escaped him again and again, but to which Bari's malignity now lent a certain force and importance which claimed his notice even amidst the sufferings and dread that had fastened upon his very life. Yet even now, on this terrible night, a night that had taxed his energy and self-control to the very utmost, he pushed aside the matter which concerned himself, and gave up all his time, and thought, and consideration to Gretchen's service.

He had seen the magistrate, who had committed her; the chaplain of the gaol, who had endeavoured, though vainly, to gain any clue as to her name, or friends. From both he had heard the same story.

She had been found by a labourer, going to his work in the early morning, in a little lonely wood on the outskirts of the town. She was standing by a little mound of earth, scattering leaves over it in a dazed and mournful way, "like so as if she were daft," the man had said. He had watched her for some moments, surprised at her strange occupation.

Then she looked up and saw him, and immediately hastened away, "quite scared-like," to use the man's words again. Impelled by curiosity, he had approached the place, and turned over the wet earth and the damp, dead leaves with his boot, and there buried beneath, and wrapped in some fine white linen —part of a woman's underdress—was the body of an infant. It was quite cold, and very, very small.

The man, horrified by the discovery, took the child in his arms and followed the woman. He overtook her on the high road leading to the town. She seemed very ill and weak, and, when he showed her the child, was well-nigh overwhelmed with terror. He bade her come with him, and went straight to the police-station and gave notice of his discovery.

The woman had said nothing. No one could get a word from her, but the evidence was so strong that she had been committed to prison on the charge of suspected child-murder, while inquiries were being made as to her name and circumstances.

There was to be an inquest on the body of the child the following day; the medical evidence would decide as to whether it had lived after its birth; there were no marks of violence, and it was possible the little creature had come by its death naturally, and the poor young mother had made its grave in this strange fashion: but all this was conjecture. In any case, the circumstances were grave enough and serious enough to necessitate a trial; and the magistrate intimated that it would be as well for Mr. Lyle to secure a clever counsel to defend the girl if he was interested in her, and mentioned the name of a barrister, celebrated for criminal cases, whose address he gave the young clergyman.

It was nearly two o'clock when Adrian Lyle took his way back to the hotel. He felt weary and exhausted; he had tasted no food since the morning, and he had undergone mental torture sufficient to try the strongest nature.

The whole weight and burden of this terrible affair was on his shoulders—the man to whose cowardice and selfishness this poor child owed her ruin, was far away

from sight or knowledge of it. He, whose guilt had laid the foundation-stone of a tragedy so fearful; whose place, in common justice, should have been beside the poor, distraught creature in her dreary cell; he, alone, suffered nothing, knew nothing.

Little wonder that Adrian Lyle lifted up his white and haggard face to the clear and starlit sky, with an inward wonder at the callousness of Heaven, the pitilessness of Fate; little wonder that, in this sad hour of hopelessness and overwrought feeling, all the cynical truths, the cruel doubts, the hard and undeniable facts which of late he had listened to, and reasoned against, should return to his mind clear and cold as the voice that had uttered them.

The subtlest temptings ever come when the mind and body are at their weakest. Ghastly shapes of sorrow and despair crowded round him now; sad, dead eyes of tortured human creatures looked back through mists of darkness which had shrouded death-beds; prayers appealed to him; voices besought him; and the anguish of the dying and afflicted cried wildly out against their doom and shrieked within his ears: "Your God is not love, but hate; pitiless, unsparing, relentless—a phantom of man's creating, to whom they vainly cry."

He paused in the quiet and deserted street, and—so it seemed to himself—for one mad, ungoverned moment, threw open the portals of his soul, the inner and secret workings of that spiritual life to which he had striven to be true through sad and toilful years. What had he gained?

Even in his worst days—his eager and impulsive youth—he had been essentially a religious man, believing in the God of the Christian creed, and seeing in Him all that was most sacred, and perfect, and divine. Zealously and fervently he had lived up to the vows he had made, and the profession he had accepted. No whited sepulchre was he; no living lie or mask of holiness. What he had believed he had taught; what he had vowed he had carried out in the face of all obstacles. But now—the thought came to him, falling straight and clear as falling star from the

Heaven on which his eyes were fixed—"What if that Heaven were but a dream, and the Godhead it enshrined naught but a beautiful conception, poetic and sublime, but with no more reality or substance than the vision of a poet's fancy, self-created, mythical, and with but a shadow's transient existence?"

Was man ever conscious—fully and entirely conscious—of that far-off and fully-adored Divinity? Did not science and phenomena contradict the strength of the most perfect Faith? Did not Nature and Humanity alike declare, "The grave is all, and end of all"? Who has come back from thence to give us assurance of the Beyond, that we call immortal? Prayer, suffering, sacrifice, self-denial, what did they all amount to? What evil could they avert? What destiny could they change? None, none; so moaned the voices of the night within his ear! None, none, so cried his own despair, rising like the waves of an ever-deepening sea, to drown for ever and for ever the hopes he had held, the Faith he had taught, leaving no foothold for failing steps, no straw for clinging hands, mighty as Sin and terrible as Suffering, those twin-gods who rule the whole groaning, travailing world where Humanity has its dwelling.

The state of moral tension became intolerable. It was too much for any mortal powers. He felt his brain growing dizzy, a deadly faintness crept over his frame. With one feeble effort for strength and composure he staggered on a few steps, then threw his arms out blindly to the darkness that closed him round, and fell heavily forwards, without sound or cry, at the feet of a man advancing rapidly towards him.

The stranger paused, startled, and not a little alarmed; then bent over the prostrate figure, and turned the face towards the light that streamed from the hotel-doors.

A cry of horror and dismay left his lips:

"Great Heaven, it is Adrian Lyle! How came he here?"

The speaker was Sir Roy Kenyon.

# Book VII.

## CHAPTER I.

### STILL CHAMPION AND DEFENDER OF THE WEAK.

It was long before Adrian Lyle awoke to consciousness, and then he had but a dull and feeble recollection of what had occurred.

He was in his own bed-room in the hotel, and one of the servants told him that a gentleman had found him lying unconscious at the door, and had assisted to carry him in and had gone for a doctor. The doctor had left but a few moments and would return in the course of an hour. Meanwhile, he had left a restoring draught, to be taken as soon as the patient became conscious.

Adrian Lyle listened to the explanation and took the draught, and then sank back on the pillows, trying to collect his thoughts, and wondering at the sense of exhaustion and bodily weakness, which rendered thought and movement alike an exertion.

Happily, the medicine soothed him gradually into a deep and dreamless sleep; a sleep of which he stood sadly in need, to repair the waste of nervous force and vital energy he had of late expended. It was broad day when he woke again, and the sun was streaming into his room.

The same attendant brought him some tea and a message from the gentleman who had come to his assistance on the previous night, to say he would like

to see Mr. Lyle for a few moments if he felt strong enough.

"I will dress and see him in the coffee-room," answered the young clergyman. "Do you know the gentleman's name?"

"Yes," was the answer. "He has taken rooms here also. The name is Sir Roy Kenyon."

Adrian Lyle started. The blood flushed to his pale face. He asked no more questions, but dismissed the man; and, dizzy and feeble as he still felt, he made his toilet, and was proceeding downstairs, when a waiter came to him with the request that he would see Sir Roy in his private sitting-room.

Adrian Lyle turned and at once followed the man. A door opened, and closed; he walked steadily forwards, and stood face to face with the old Baronet.

Sir Roy had risen at his entrance, and now bowed coldly and distantly as he pointed to a chair. "I hope," he said, "you are better this morning. It was fortunate I found you. Your condition last night alarmed me."

"I must thank you," answered Adrian Lyle, "for the service you rendered. I have gone through a great deal of trouble and mental anxiety lately. I suppose a collapse was inevitable."

"I was surprised to find you here," continued Sir Roy. "May I ask if we have met in connection with the same business—this unfortunate girl?"

Adrian Lyle looked straight at the calm, unmoved face.

"Sir Roy," he said, "do you know the real facts of the case? Who has been your informant in the first instance?"

"Bari," was the answer.

"Ah," said Adrian Lyle quickly. "I thought as much. Then you have not heard the real facts."

"I have heard," said Sir Roy, "that my nephew, in the first instance, and you, Mr. Lyle, in the second, are concerned in this deplorable and disgraceful occurrence."

"I!" interrupted Adrian Lyle, the blood flushing duskily to his brow.

"Yes, you. As far as Neale was concerned, the—the affair ended in Rome; but your share in it is far more serious, and has continued up to the present tragedy. I believe——"

"Stop," cried Adrian Lyle imperatively. "I cannot permit such an accusation to stand! Has not your daughter told you the particulars of our interview?"

"You will oblige me," said Sir Roy haughtily, "by keeping Miss Kenyon's name out of this discussion. I am surprised—more than surprised—that your own good taste should not have prevented you speaking to her on the matter as you did."

"I spoke in my own defence," said Adrian Lyle with equal hauteur. "She made an accusation against me on the grounds of certain information given by Bari, who is nothing but a spy and informer. This accusation I indignantly denied. The facts of the case are these. My first acquaintance with your nephew began at Venice, and there he introduced me to this young lady as his wife."

"Come, come," interposed Sir Roy, with an indulgent smile; "I am a man of the world; you, Mr. Lyle, despite your cloth, know well the follies and fancies of youth. Could you suppose for a moment that a young man of my nephew's position and prospects would enter into a serious alliance with a low-born peasant-girl? Ridiculous!"

"A low-born peasant-girl!" repeated Adrian Lyle. "Sir Roy, you are indeed labouring under grave error. The girl is a lady in every sense of the word—fair, graceful, well-educated, and of an old Austrian family. They had intended her for a religious life, and, indeed, she was just about to enter a convent when your nephew unfortunately made her acquaintance. She herself told me, that on her family discovering she was in love with an Englishman—of whom, as a race, they had an absolute horror—they resolved that she should enter a convent at once. To escape this fate she fled with your nephew to Vienna, where, she believed, he married her, and took her to Italy. There I met them. He seemed so

deeply and passionately in love with her that I for long entertained no suspicion as to the legality of their union; but by degrees I grew uneasy, and at Rome I had an explanation with him. He was angry and indignant at my interference; but he ended in giving me a deliberate assurance that the girl was his wife."

"And, knowing all this," demanded Sir Roy, his face white and stern with anger, "why did you keep the affair a secret from me?"

"He had exacted a promise from me to do so," answered Adrian Lyle. "He said he had certain expectations from you which necessitated his marriage being a secret. I had given my word—I felt angry and grieved that I had done so—but I could see no reason for breaking it, until——"

"Until that letter came?" asked Sir Roy.

"Yes. You must have seen how shocked I was at learning in his own words such an acknowledgment of perfidy and baseness. I could scarcely credit it. I knew where this poor deceived girl lived—I went at once to her. I found Bari again beforehand with me. He had just told her of your nephew's treachery, declaring that the marriage was nothing but a sham, arranged by himself, and that her betrayer now wished to break with her for ever. Sir Roy—if you had seen that poor young broken-hearted creature

but what need of words to describe her agony? Look at its sequel—see how the shock and shame have bereft her of reason as of hope; go and see her in her prison cell, a wreck of the youth, and beauty, and sweetness I remember but a few brief months ago; see her thus, a child in years, her dream-world shattered, her lovely nature wrecked by the wanton cruelty of a weak man's caprice; listen to her broken words, the piteous babbling of that shattered brain; and ask yourself if on all the earth there ever lived a sadder sight. Ask yourself, too, who is the real criminal; who it is that deserves to stand now by her side pilloried by the world's scorn, condemned by all that is just, and honourable, and fair dealing, in the eyes of his fellow-man?"

He had risen from his chair, though one hand still rested on it for support. The compelling force of eyes and voice were on Sir Roy's shrinking face, which had grown white and ghastly with each fresh proof of a guilt he had determined to refute in mere obstinacy and disbelief.

But truth spoke out in every line of this man's face; this man of whom he would have believed a base and shameful lie; this man whose good name had been dragged through the mire of a cruel scandal for sake of the promise that had sealed his lips; this man who alone had befriended the desolate girl in her misery, and thought it no shame to stand by her now in this most terrible hour of degradation!

As he met that look; as all the faith, and truth, and nobility of Adrian Lyle's most noble nature suddenly spoke and lived before the man who had come here as his accuser; he felt the last hope he had held in his nephew's honour give way. He covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud.

Adrian Lyle watched him silently, almost pityingly. He put the insult to himself aside. It seemed of little consequence what was believed of him, so clear of offence did his own conscience show his actions.

Mistaken, trusting, he might have been, but he had been true to the promise of his friendship; he had come to Gretchen's side in her hour of misery, even as he had said he would; and now he stood, her champion and defender, ready to give her every aid of human love and human pity; ready in face of heaven and man to proclaim her innocence; ready, ay, at any cost, to take her hand within his own and lead her to safety and to peace, in the face of all who scorned and scoffed at that chivalry of soul, which is but the world's byword for what is too purely noble for its comprehension—ready to do and dare as any knight of old; asking no reward; seeking no favour; but simply for sake of a great and unselfish love, whose only guerdon had been pain and suffering!

The silence was strained almost to intensity. Adrian Lyle could say no more. Sir Roy dared not.

At last, he lifted his head and looked sadly at the brave and noble face before him.

"Mr. Lyle," he said brokenly, "I have done you a great wrong; I—I ask your pardon. My only excuse is my love for the boy. I could not believe him so base. I have looked upon him as a son all my life. The dearest hope of that life has been, that he should one day become the husband of my child; that I should see them happy and honoured in the old home. You can imagine how I fought against this story—refusing to believe Neale capable of such baseness. Bari, who was in his confidence, represented the girl as an adventuress; and swore to me that at Rome she had left my nephew to follow you. I believed him; perhaps, because I wished to believe him. Again I ask your pardon. He shall confess that he has lied; he shall be forced to refute the base and cruel story now circulating to your discredit, through the length and breadth of the parish—he shall."

"Stay," interposed Adrian Lyle quietly. "I can afford to deal with him in my own way, and at my own time. The reparation and the justice I ask from your hands, Sir Roy, is for this poor victim, whose fate is still in the balance. At all cost, even at risk of the scandal to an honoured name, the true facts of her story must be told. All that money can do for her safety and defence lies in the power of your wealth and influence. May I trust to you? My means are small, though Heaven knows I would give every farthing I have in the world to do her service. But you——"

"Say no more," answered Sir Roy. "I will do all that it is possible to do."

"Then," said Adrian Lyle, "my mind is more at rest. We can but wait the issue of the trial, now. Her fate lies not in our hands, but in that of a Higher Power—may the mercy of Heaven control the justice of man!"

"Amen!" said Sir Roy solemnly, and he extended his hand. Adrian Lyle took it, and held it in a long and silent grasp. There was no need for further words. One man at last believed in him, and would be his friend for life.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE CLOUDS GATHER.

EVERY day Sir Roy Kenyon and Adrian Lyle visited the poor accused creature in her cell; but neither the one nor the other could draw from her any information that might serve for her defence at the approaching trial.

The inquest had proved that the child had been born alive and was at least three days old at the time it had been discovered; but where the poor young mother had been for those three days, no one could find out.

With untiring patience did Adrian Lyle watch the girl's mental condition, feeling assured that this was only some temporary cloud straining the tortured brain. Gently, tenderly as a woman might have done, but as no woman would have had courage and strength to do, he soothed her and comforted her in the paroxysms of terror which sometimes overtook her, and ever and always sought to lead her mind to that one clue which yet always escaped him.

By it she might be cleared—so said her counsel; without it there was nothing to do but plead "temporary insanity."

Anna von Waldstein had not visited the prison again. The shock and horror of that scene had resulted in serious illness, and she had left neither her room nor heard since.

Sir Roy had telegraphed to Neale to return to England at once on urgent private affairs; but, in the disturbed state of the district where he was stationed, it was scarcely to be expected that he could obtain leave of absence.

Sir Roy had also written to Alexis, informing her of that interview with Adrian Lyle, which had served to convince him of the young clergyman's entire innocence in the matter; and to the Rector, stating the

facts of the case, and begging him to consider well before carrying out his threat of referring the matter to the Bishop, since it was clear enough who was the real culprit.

The result of this letter to Mr. Bray was one of apology and regret to Adrian Lyle, and a request that he would think no more of their disagreement, but return to his duties as soon as he found it convenient.

The young man replied with all due courtesy, but maintained that his abrupt dismissal gave him now the right to consider his engagement at an end; and insisted that, though he regretted to seem disobliging, he thought it best not to return to Medehurst.

In the absence of Sir Roy, to whom he always took his grievances and troubles, the old Rector went to Alexis, and confided to her the dreadful mistake he had made, and the difficulty he should find in procuring another curate to suit him so admirably as Adrian Lyle had done. He even gave her his letter to read, knowing nothing of what it cost her to maintain that proud composure; guessing nothing of the conflict she was waging with herself as she remembered the bitter insult she had cast at his feet; feeling herself degraded in his eyes for ever by the memory of that one most hateful interview, when jealousy had dimmed her usual clear sense of justice, and those fierce yet vague emotions of scorn, loving, impotence, and regret, had roused her to a display of anger both humiliating and unwomanly—a display for which atonement and forgetfulness were alike impossible.

She did not answer her father's letter—she dared not trust herself to do so; and to the Rector she merely handed back Adrian Lyle's cold and courteous epistle, saying: "I thought curates were as plentiful as blackberries, Mr. Bray. Why trouble about the loss of one when you can get fifty others by an advertisement in the *Rock* or the *Evangelist* to-morrow?"

In very truth Adrian Lyle scarcely remembered that interview which haunted her so incessantly. His heart was far too troubled, his mind far too occupied

for any memory of the proud, cold, and singular being, whose influence on his life had been so short-lived.

The task he had set himself demanded all his strength and all his calmness; he had to fight for Gretchen's honour and for Gretchen's safety; to fight single-handed against obstacles that might well have daunted any man's courage; to fight for an innocence he determined should be proved, and to establish which he worked night and day.

The lawyers had told him that one witness might save her, a witness who could prove the birth of the child and the condition of the mother's mind. But to find such a witness without help from Gretchen herself, seemed daily more impossible.

By Sir Roy's influence they got the case remanded for another week, and then it was that a strange and desperate resolve took possession of Adrian Lyle.

He determined to trace step by step Gretchen's course during those three days. Starting from that wood where she had been discovered, he would go backwards on the course she had taken, no matter how difficult it might be.

He told Sir Roy of his project, winning indeed but scant encouragement.

"The police have made every inquiry," said the Baronet. "If such a witness existed, we should have heard of it by this time."

But Adrian Lyle shook his head.

"I have not much faith in the police," he said quietly. "And though I have never in my life played amateur detective, I am determined to do so now. I am convinced that some one could come forward to prove what is now withheld by one of two things."

"And what," asked Sir Roy, "are they?"

"Ignorance or malice," was the answer.

The fact of exertion, the impelling force that hurried him along the road of action, served in a great measure to alleviate the intensity of mental anguish with which Adrian Lyle had become of late so terribly familiar.

Anything, he felt, was better than to contemplate

dumbly, helplessly, that changed and sad young life; to listen to the broken words; to gaze at the altered face, with all its sweet and trusting innocence burnt out by the touch of that fatal brand which still flames in the hand of that guardian of the fatal tree—the tree which bears the fruit of knowledge of good and evil.

Away from her, his memory pictured her as she had been, not as she was; though at times the agony of unavailing regret would thrill his soul, as he felt that never word or deed of mortal man would restore her to that lost place, that pedestal of purity and innocence from which her angel face had first looked back to his.

He dared not trust himself to think of it. He forced aside the misery of thought by the restlessness of action. Hour by hour and day by day he pursued the course he had set himself, steadily and relentlessly, keen of eye and strong of nerve, neglecting not the smallest incident that might serve as a link in the chain he was forging. With endurance strung to its highest tension; with patience and resolve waiting on energy and zeal; so he carried on his task, knowing well that his only reward might be the knowledge that he had saved one who would not even know her saviour, or the doom he had averted.

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## CHAPTER III.

### RETRIBUTION.

The day of the trial had dawned at last. Sir Roy Kenyon sat in his private sitting-room with his untasted breakfast before him, marvelling that still no word had come from Adrian Lyle.

There could be no further postponement now. The line of defence must remain, and the stigma of indelible dishonour would be for ever on the life of this poor child, who, to all intents and purposes, was his nephew's wife.

Keenly and bitterly did he feel the humiliation.

More bitterly than ever, since he had known what it was to miss the clear, simple counsel and the ready sympathy of a man whom he confessed he had never fully appreciated till this hour of suffering.

Time passed on. His anxious eyes turned, ever and again, to the clock on the mantel-piece ; his face looked worn and aged, as if by years of trouble ; all its bright good-humour and genial glow were extinguished by this one feeling of suspense and dread.

Ten o'clock was the hour fixed for the trial. It wanted a quarter to ten—and still no word or sign of Adrian Lyle.

Five minutes—ten minutes—passed. Then Sir Roy nerved himself to face the ordeal before him. He rang for the man to remove the breakfast things. For the last time he asked that oft-repeated question : "Is there no message, no letter, for me ? "

For the last time came the same monotonous answer : "None, sir."

With a foreboding, for which he could not account, Sir Roy left the hotel and took his way to the Court-house. The barrister who was to defend Gretchen procured him a place near himself. To him, as to the waiter, Sir Roy put the same anxious question, and with the same result. Adrian Lyle had not returned, and had not written.

A faint stir in the crowded court. They were bringing in the prisoner.

Sir Roy felt the blood rush to his brow, as he looked once again on that sad and lovely face—lifted with a child's piteous bewilderment to the keen and pitiless scrutiny of those curious eyes.

Yet there was something in it to-day, so it seemed to him, not altogether the same; something —a struggle—an effort at recollection. He could not have described what it was ; but the girl's gesture, as she pushed back the loose, thick hair from her brow, sent a thrill of hope and yet of fear to his heart. Gradually the look in her eyes became steady and intense. She seemed to be

listening to the barrister who was formally opening the case; but no comprehension of its details, as yet, penetrated to the dull and clouded brain.

Her extreme youth, and the beauty of the sad young face, that was like a beaten-down snowdrop, insensibly moved all hearts. As incident after incident, fact after fact were linked together in the chain of evidence, there was less of horror than of pity in the eyes that turned to her. The instinctive feeling in all minds was, "Surely there is some error here; those frail, white hands so helplessly clasped, could never have been guilty of such a crime."

The case having been stated, the first witness was called—the man who had seen her by the little mound which had proved to be her child's grave.

Then came the medical evidence and that of the police.

Gretchen's counsel cross-examined both, but with little result in favour of the accused.

He then commenced his defence, commenting briefly and pithily on the weakness of the evidence, which had failed to prove that, in the first instance, the prisoner was the mother of the child; and in the next, that the child had not died from purely natural causes. He then called his first witness—the Reverend Adrian Lyle.

Sir Roy started and glanced eagerly round; then he drew a deep breath of relief as he saw Adrian approach and take his stand in the witness-box. He looked at the defending barrister, and saw that he was reading a paper just handed to him by the Clerk of the Court.

The contents seemed to give him great satisfaction. He looked at Adrian Lyle, and nodded; then referred to his notes, and proceeded to the business of examining the witness.

This was the ordeal for which Sir Roy had steeled himself. It taxed all his self-command to sit there and listen to that grave, rich voice, telling so plainly and clearly the story of his nephew's baseness, and yet he knew it was inevitable. The name was bound to come out, and Adrian Lyle was sworn to speak the truth on behalf of the poor, forsaken girl

His evidence created a great sensation in the Court. The fact of her leaving home in a condition to which he was obliged to assent was now firmly established; the state of her mind at the time of her flight was plain enough to all that crowd of intent and wondering listeners; and Sir Roy's head bent lower and lower in its agony of shame as he traced that miserable history, step by step from its first impulse of innocent compassion, to selfish betrayal and unconscious crime.

Adrian Lyle's voice ceased. There was a momentary lull. Then the counsel for the defendant rose again and called a name, at which Sir Roy lifted his head in momentary surprise. He saw a dirty, feeble old crone hobbling to her place, and he heard what no one else seemed to hear, a faint, low cry from the pale lips of the prisoner. Her eyes were fastened on that evil-looking face, with something of horror and fear in their fixed regard; her hands, before loosely linked, now clasped themselves with trembling eagerness on the rail before her.

Then across the hush and stillness of expectancy, came the low, harsh tones of the old woman's voice giving the statement for which she was asked. She said: "My name is Phœbe Wills. I live in Stony Hollow, four miles or so from the parish of Leawoods. I remember the prisoner yonder. I found her in the wood below my cottage one morning early, about two weeks ago. I had gone to get wood, and she was sitting on the trunk of a tree all alone, and seemed to be very ill and not quite right-like in her head. I told her to come along wi' me, and took her into the cottage. It's a lonesome place, and no one ever comes by; and I knew 'twas no use to leave her so. I did what I could, and all went right, though she seemed in mortal terror as to how some one would find her, and begged me to hide her and tell no one; and seeing she was a lady, and well dressed, and so young, and so pretty, I thought it a bit strange. But 'twas naught to me so long as she was all right and the child. However, the next day, I saw it was ailing, and at sunset it died."

A visible sensation ran through the Court. Sir Roy felt a touch on his arm, and looking up, found Adrian Lyle sitting beside him. His face was very white, his eyes haggard and burning, as if with sleepless nights and anxious days.

"It will be all right," he whispered. "I found the one witness we needed, as I told you I should."

The woman resumed.

"I asked the mother what we was to do, and if she hadn't better write to her friends; but she only cried dreadful, and said that she had no one in the world to care for her, and that no one would know; and begged me to keep her secret, and to humour her I promised, for she seemed terrible feverish and excited. So I made her comfortable for the night, and wrapped the child in some of her own linen and laid it beside her, for she would have it so; and then I made up the fire and sat down in my old chair, for she had the bed; and I suppose I dropped off to sleep, for when I woke she was gone and the child too, and never word or clue as to who, or what, she might be. Well, I thought as how she'd gone back to her friends—leastways I was sure that if I was wanted I'd be found, and so I was."

"You say, on your oath, that the child died of natural causes, the day after its birth?"

"Certain sure it did," was the answer. "It was a weakly, puling thing, and not full-grown. I wonder it lived an hour."

"Was the mother in a fit condition to leave your roof and journey all the distance to ——, where she was found?"

"She said she felt quite strong; but she was a bit fevered, I thought."

"And how comes it that, after circumstances so suspicious, you never mentioned the matter to any of your neighbours, or made any inquiries as to what had become of the prisoner?"

"I've got no neighbours nearer than a matter of four or five mile, and I'm not fond of trudging to them when I'm that bad with rheumatics that I can scarce draw water, or pick up wood. The young

woman was old enough to take care of herself. I was a bit frightened when I found she'd gone so sudden-like; but I could do naught, as I told the parson yonder when he found me."

Another witness yet—old Peggy, from the Laurels.

She deposed to the state of her mistress's health and mind on the day when she had left her home. She said that the prisoner had evidently received some bad news brought the first thing in the morning by a "foreign gentleman," who had upset her mistress terrible. Then Mr. Lyle had called, and she seemed to get quieter and better; but all day she was crying and fretting, and would eat nothing. Towards evening two strange ladies came, also foreign, and, after seeing them, her mistress grew rapidly worse and had a succession of fainting fits. They put her to bed, and one of the ladies said that she would watch by her all night. However, in the morning her mistress was not in the house, and they never knew what had become of her. One of the foreign ladies went away. She seemed to be a nun, or Sister of Mercy, or something of that sort. The other saw Mr. Lyle, and she and Mr. Lyle both said that they would find out where her mistress was. The foreign lady used to be away all day, and come back just to sleep. One morning Mr. Lyle came very early, about six o'clock, and took her away with him. They had said nothing to witness of where they were going; but she heard during the day that her mistress had been found, and was in prison. Didn't believe it till she was subpœnaed as a witness; knew nothing of the foreign gentleman; had only seen him twice, and each time he had always upset her mistress; didn't know his name; but could recognise him if she saw him."

Any more witnesses for the defence? Yes; one more.

A whisper, a faint murmur, as the wigged heads of the barristers bend towards one another. Sir Roy's face is hidden from sight; his heart is full of sad and painful thoughts.

"She will be saved," he tells himself; "but oh!

the shame and horror of this wretched history; when will that be forgotten by all those who have heard it?"

A name is called; but he never heeds it. Another witness! Why do they want another witness? He lifts his head; he looks half wearily, half curiously at the tall, veiled figure standing in the box.

Some one speaks to her; she lifts her veil. He sees a beautiful face, cold and white as a statue, proud as a queen; he sees the curved lips that touch the book she holds in her hand; and then, his own face blanched and gray, Sir Roy turns to Adrian Lyle, and lays one trembling hand upon his arm.

"Who," he cries, in a hoarse and terrible whisper, "is that?"

Adrian Lyle looks amazed at the gray face, the shaking lips.

"That lady?" he answered. "It is Anna von Waldstein."

"And why is she here?"

"She is Gretchen's mother."

A stir in the Court; a hoarse cry; the movement of many figures; the sound of frightened voices.

"Make way there! A gentleman in a fit."

The crowd parts and sways aside. There is silence profound as death. For surely something terrible as death itself has laid its icy hand upon the changed and awful face of Sir Roy, who, altered from all likeness to himself, is borne out and away to the air and the sunlight, and the smile of the glad, blue sky, to all the mockery of life and nature, which breathes around and over the senseless form, on which the finger of Heaven has branded the one word, "Retribution."

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## CHAPTER IV.

### "LOYAL TO YOUR FAITH."

NIGHT has fallen—dark, still, and soft with starry splendour—night bringing joy, and rest, and peace of balmy slumber to some, yet filled with dread and

haunted by dark shapes of sin, and sorrow, and bitter memories to others.

There are lights burning dimly in a sick-room, and figures passing to and fro, but on the bed one figure lies motionless and unresponsive, the heavy, stertorous breathing its only sign of life. Money can do much, and money has secured the best advice, the best attendance; but money cannot give back speech to the silent lips, intelligence to the numbed brain, motion or power to the stricken limbs.

In the full possession of life, strength, and energy, he had been struck down as a tree that the lightning tears. Powerless and speechless he lay there, each function of Nature arrested; thought, feeling, mind, all fled from that inert mass of speechless and reasonless flesh; a combination of physical forces of no more value than a stone by the wayside.

Adrian Lyle sits by the bed of the paralysed man, nor leaves it all that terrible night. It seems as if the accomplishment of one task meant for him but the commencement of another. For his energy and determination had saved Gretchen. She had been acquitted; she was no longer condemned to the horrors of that prison cell, but was safe under her mother's care, and beneath the same roof that sheltered himself.

The gladness of relief which had come to him, with the knowledge of that unanimous verdict, was in itself strength and hope and rest. The long, terrible fear was over—over for ever. That thought was with him through the long night vigil by the side of this stricken man. Come what might, she was safe, and, if in Heaven's good time that cloud should be lifted from the poor numbed brain, and reason once more shed its light over the lovely face—oh! then, he told himself, his reward would be complete; he could thank Heaven, with all his heart, that he had been of even the smallest service in her need, no matter at what pain, at what cost to himself.

The night waned. The chill and change of atmosphere bespoke the approach of dawn. Adrian Lyle rose and went softly to the window and raised the

blind. As he touched it, a faint sound caused him to look round. The sick man was trying to raise himself in the bed. In a second he was beside him, and the nurse, starting from her chair, came to the other side. There was a change in the face. The eyes, eager, wild, almost terrible in their impotent desire, seemed beseeching something, or some one, to come to his aid. Hoarse and unintelligible words fell from the distorted mouth. They could not, with the best will, comprehend what he meant, and his efforts became agonising.

"Perhaps he can write," suggested the nurse.

Adrian Lyle took a pencil and sheet of paper, and placed them before the sick man. The power of will was stronger than the inert fingers. He scrawled something, and looked eagerly at Adrian Lyle. He could make out:

"Gretchen?"

"She is safe," he answered. "Do not distress yourself; she is quite safe."

Sir Roy leant back with a deep-drawn sigh. Presently the restless eyes again fixed themselves on the young clergyman's face. Again the paper and pencil were in requisition. This time the word "Alexis" appeared, and another that looked like "Send."

Adrian Lyle nodded.

"I sent a messenger to the Abbey last night," he said. "Your daughter will be here in a few hours. Do you wish to see her?"

"Yes."

"I will bring her to you as soon as she arrives."

Then they laid him back on the pillows, and the restless eyes closed; the breathing grew quicker.

Adrian Lyle looked at the nurse.

"Is it a good sign?" he asked. "Will he recover?"

The woman shook her head doubtfully.

"He may," she said, "partially. There is certainly an improvement. Who is the lady he expects?"

"His daughter."

"Perhaps she may do him good. One never can

tell how these cases will end. If it is only a slight stroke he may get back his speech, or partly the use of his limbs; but he'll never be the same man again, never."

And, with these words ringing in his ears, Adrian Lyle left the sick-room to take the rest which he so sorely needed. He wondered in his heart what Alexis Kenyon would do or say in a place and scene like this; wondered, too, whether anything so humanising as a tear had ever dimmed those cold, proud eyes.

And, with that wonder still in his mind, he fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, and woke only at a summons from the nurse.

"Miss Kenyon is here, and waiting to see you; for Sir Roy is asleep, and the doctor will not allow him to be disturbed."

Ten minutes after receiving that message Adrian Lyle entered Sir Roy's private sitting-room. So much had his mind been absorbed of late, that it was not until he stood face to face with Alexis Kenyon that he remembered their last parting. Yet the sting of her insult no longer rankled in his mind; he felt so great a pity for the spoilt and capricious child of fortune deprived of lover and father at one and the same moment. For something told him that Neale Kenyon would never be her husband now.

She did not advance to meet him: only stood there in the centre of the room; the dark furs at her throat loosened and thrown back; her face, more like a delicate flower than ever, raised in questioning wonder and expectation.

"What has happened?" she asked, her voice uncertain and tremulous. "I came to see my father. I was told that you were with him. Is he ill?"

"Yes," answered Adrian Lyle gravely. "He is very ill. Otherwise we would not have troubled you to come here."

She turned very white. He saw her lips quiver. Then she sank down on a chair beside her.

"Will you tell me," she said faintly, "what is the matter?"

Then, very gently and delicately, Adrian Lyle

narrated the circumstances of the seizure and the gravity of the case, which at its most favourable termination would only restore her father to her a wreck of the strong and hearty man she had last seen.

She listened in perfect silence, the colour did not return to her face or lips. He almost feared she would faint.

When he ceased speaking, she lifted her head and looked at him. There were great tears in her eyes; she shivered, as if with cold.

"You have done all this for him," she said in a low, unsteady voice. "How can I thank you? It is like coals of fire—indeed—I, who had wronged you—insulted you——"

"Do not speak of it," he answered. "You had only heard a distorted version of the story, and I could not blame you for being faithful to your cousin. When Sir Roy heard my explanation, he was perfectly satisfied. I never thought again of what you had said. How could you tell whether Bari had spoken the truth or not?"

A deep flush stained the clear, white skin. Her eyes sank before that calm and noble gaze.

"I knew," she said, in a sudden passion of self-accusation, "I knew well enough that you could not have done a base or cruel action; but I would not believe then——"

"No," he said gently, "and I do not blame you. You were loyal to your faith in Neale. I could not have wished you otherwise, even to save myself pain."

"Loyal to her faith in Neale!" She whispered it to herself over and over again. Loyal to her faith—she, so proud, so callous, so arrogant, indifferent to praise or blame, to love or friendship! She loyal! She could almost have laughed aloud in the ironic bitterness of her mood; but with an effort she controlled herself.

"You judge others by yourself," she said. "It is an error, but a very noble one. Still, before I go to my father's side, I should like to feel that you are not my enemy, that you have forgiven me."

"Pray say no more," he interrupted, as he took the

hand she extended to him. "There was no need of forgiveness, but if you wish assurance of it, I give it frankly with all my heart."

"Thank you,"she said. The proud lips quivered. The beautiful face grew strangely soft. It seemed to her that the touch of his hand, the kind and truthful glance of the deep, grave eyes, broke up the ice of hardness and pride within her heart, leaving only a sense of bitter shame and intense humiliation at the memory of the scene which he had declared forgotten. But she knew that she could never forget it, and the recollection fretted her with the mortification of a strong nature which was itself betrayed into momentary weakness.

In the midst of these thoughts she remembered her father and his danger, and turned to Adrian Lyle once more.

"May I not go to him now?" she said hurriedly. "I promise you that I will be calm and self-controlled. You need not fear."

"He is asleep just now, and must not be disturbed."

"That is all the better," she answered. "I will slip into the room, and when he wakes he will find me by his side."

"Very well," said Adrian Lyle quietly. "The doctors knew you were coming. I suppose they would not refuse you admission."

He left the room, and she followed.

He wondered a little that she had asked no question of the trial, or of Gretchen's fate. But he thought she was too absorbed in her fears and anxiety for her father to remember what, in the first instance, had led to this strange and alarming seizure; for Adrian Lyle attributed it to nothing but the anxiety of mind, the shock, and dread, and serious worry, which all this scandal had occasioned the proud old Baronet.

Not for a moment had he associated it with the sudden appearance of Anna von Waldstein, or his answer to Sir Roy's question. What could there have been in common between these two lives, which in any way should shock or trouble either at this

time? The idea was too unlikely and preposterous for consideration.

It was carelessly pushed aside as he led Alexis Kenyon to that mournful chamber; it was forgotten entirely as he closed the door, and crossed the long corridor, and knocked for admission at another room situated at some distance from the suite which Sir Roy had engaged.

A voice bade him enter, and he did so, his heart beating wildly, a look of feverish expectancy in his eyes. They flashed eager questions to the woman who rose at his entrance, pale and troubled, yet with something which was almost gladness in the beautiful face that had lost all its hardness and pride.

"I thought you would come," she said eagerly. "Thank Heaven she is asleep still. The draught the doctor gave her has at least brought her rest. She has slept now for ten hours."

"Did she ask any questions? Did she seem disturbed?" asked Adrian Lyle, as he took the chair to which Anna von Waldstein pointed.

"No, she seemed quite content," she said. Then her voice broke. She covered her face from his compassionate eyes.

"How she is changed!" she cried. "It wrings my heart to see her. Would to heaven I could bring him here now to see his handiwork!"

"Heaven will bring it home to him, I doubt not," said Adrian Lyle solemnly.

"In a month at farthest he should be here," she went on feverishly. "Well, he will find he has not a simple, ignorant child to deal with now. For every hour of her misery there shall be a heavy reckoning. Two lives wantonly destroyed, and he, the murderer, goes unscathed. Is this Heaven's justice?"

Adrian Lyle was silent. Stormy passions would rise within his heart whenever he remembered that base and selfish coward, who had lied to his very face, and then sent his miserable tool and spy to dig a pitfall for his feet, and throw on him the shame and disaster of this poor child's fate.

He had been wont to say that his heart acknowledged no enemy; but he could say so no longer, for

his horror and dislike of Kenyon, and his indignation at the very thought of Bari, were far opposed to Christian serenity and long-suffering.

"Heaven keep us apart," he prayed inwardly, knowing that in his heart there sprang, with a demon's strength, the fierce, mad desire for vengeance—human vengeance—life for life, suffering for suffering, shame for shame; knowing, too, that when his hour came, he could and would deal it unsparingly despite the futility of any deed or word to undo the bitter past, to give back the lost innocence, the lost joy, the lost purity and beauty of soul to the broken-mindless thing which was but the shell of that Gretchen he remembered.

Silent and absorbed in thought he sat there, and the woman by his side was silent too; unknowing of what still lay beyond the tragedy of her child's life; unknowing what further ill might lurk almost at her own threshold.

So strange, so subtle are the mysteries of Fate; so weak and yet so strong those slender threads which bind life to life and heart to heart, until the net is fast and strong and all complete, and neither strength nor will can break it clear and free from the limbs it fetters and the actions it controls.

That long silence was broken at length by a sound so strange that both Adrian Lyle and his companion started and looked at each other with paling faces and eyes full of awe and almost of fear. The sound was that of low, plaintive singing.

As he held his breath and listened to the voice, something familiar in the air struck on Adrian Lyle's ear, and carried his thoughts back to a summer night, and the ebb and flow of quiet waters, and a girlish voice expressing a wish that impulse decided him to gratify.

It was all so long ago—so terribly long ago. He felt himself trembling with the rush of memories; then the voice ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

He rose to his feet—a sort of passionate tumult in his heart for a moment deprived him of calmness. He never realised what that agitation betrayed. He

crossed the room, and went to the piano, and, opening it, struck a few chords, and softly continued the same air which he had sung for Gretchen once, which she in some chance moment of memory had slowly and falteringly repeated behind that closed door.

The thrill of hope in his heart lent his voice the magic of an angel's melody. Softly, passionately, entreatingly, the rich, full tones breathed forth their prayer, and the listener sat there spell-bound, her eyes on the door, which slowly, doubtfully opened, revealing a figure loosely robed in white—a figure slender, shadowy as a vision, with pale, wan face, and eyes which looked in awed and almost child-like wonder from out a veil of shrouding hair.

Adrian Lyle felt her presence, but he dared not trust himself to look. His voice grew softer—trembled—broke. Then a low, strange cry reached his ears. He turned—it was a moment such as life could never give again. The eyes that met his own gave back recognition, wonder, delight. The low, faltering words spoke out his own name.

"And it was you," she cried, and laughed in pretty gleeful triumph. "You—and you never told us! I said that there was no other such voice in all the world. But why are you here—now?" She glanced around almost fearfully, and Adrian Lyle watched her spell-bound—not daring to move or speak. She put up her hand to her head with the old, bewildered gesture. "Oh, I remember," she went on slowly. "This is not Venice. That was all long ago."

Her arms dropped to her side. Piteously her eyes turned to him.

"Oh, help me," she cried. "I can't remember. Something has happened—tell me what it is. I know you—you were always so kind to me. Why am I here, and where is Neale?"

Not to save his life could Adrian Lyle have spoken. As if wondering at his silence she came nearer. She shook back the bright, curling masses of her hair, and stretched out her trembling hands.

"Won't you speak?" she cried imploringly. "All is dim, unreal, confused; but your face is like a friend's face, and I know that you are Adrian Lyle."

# Book VIII.

## CHAPTER I.

### "FORGIVEN!"

As she uttered his name Adrian Lyle sprang to his feet, white as death and trembling as the weakest woman might have trembled. He was by her side; her hands, like fluttered birds, were prisoned in his clasp; his eyes—Heaven knows what she might have seen in his eyes, as for one fleeting second the veil was lifted—and his soul spoke out to hers without warning or premeditation.

What she saw seemed to arrest all further speech. The change in herself had not struck home to her recovered consciousness with so great a sense of wonder as the change in him. All the pain and weariness; all the anxious hours; all those sleepless nights and hopeless days had left marks indelible for all time; and he, who had borne the strain so long in its very hopelessness, now felt endurance snap like a frail thread beneath the pity of her glance and the innocent questioning of the childish lips.

She shuddered, and drew her hands from his with sudden, passionate force, and, covering her face from sight, cried brokenly to him once more to tell her what had happened.

"There is a dark, thick cloud," she moaned, "between me and all memory. I have been ill, have I not?—but before that there was—something——"

Adrian Lyle turned aside. Not in any words could he frame what had come to him; not by any power of

will could he have put that hateful story of shame and betrayal before her, as the terrible reality he knew it to be.

He beckoned to the pale and trembling woman who was looking on in silence and anguish—all mingled with a terrible and scarce-realised joy—at this scene.

"You tell her," he said in a low and broken whisper; "I cannot." And he went swiftly away from their presence—feeling that on the sacredness of such re-union he dared not look.

How long a time had passed, or how short? What passion of prayer and thanksgiving had left his lips? Dimly he knew he had groped his way to his own room and fallen on his knees without a cry or sound—the very force of emotion was too intense for outward expression.

But, at last, his brain seemed to clear; the stifling throbs of pulse and heart were less painful. He staggered to his feet and looked around him—a cold sweat upon his brow, his tall frame shaking like a leaf.

"Oh," he cried in his heart, "I did not think it would have been so hard, or that I was such a coward. I have not got over it; it is not a whit easier than it was when—when I left her roof. And she, poor child—poor, little, forsaken Gretchen—how little she guesses!"

He threw himself on the bed by which he had been kneeling, his face hidden in his folded arms. The bitter loneliness of his life, the hardship of long repression, came home to him with added force now.

"He will come home," he said to himself, "and she will forgive him, and the past will be forgotten. She may be happy yet. It is in his power to make her so, and I can only say—Heaven's will be done. Happiness is not for me!"

But though he said it, he could not take the hard truth home to his heart; could not, in the force, and strength, and passionate craving of manhood, resign himself coldly to the self-abnegation which his words breathed.

How he could have loved her! nay, why deceive himself?—how he did love her!—how happy he would have made her! And yet Fate had given her to a coward and a traitor, in whom she saw the ideal of her girlhood's dreams, and the lover of her innocent youth.

Adrian Lyle had had many dark hours in his life, but never hour so dark as this; through deep and bitter waters did his soul pass, well-nigh overwhelmed by their depth and blackness. Was this life—this terrible strain on mental and physical forces, this incessant groaning, sorrowing, travailing of anguished soul and tempted body? Must it be all sacrifice, all struggle, and then the darkness and silence of eternal night?

At this juncture thought seemed to cease. A strange lull and calm came over him. His brain throbbed less painfully; the laboured beating of his heart grew slow and quiet, the strained and fevered look died out of his eyes.

"I am ungrateful," he said to himself. "With what anguish I prayed for her recovery, and now Heaven has restored her; her hour of trial is past; the future may yet hold blessing and peace. I should thank God on my knees for such mercy, not rail at my own sadder fortunes."

He closed his eyes and lay there for some moments longer, thankful for the lull that had followed that storm of awakened feeling, considering whether the duties of life might not yet be powerful enough to claim his services, enchain his attention, and fill his heart, though actual and personal happiness were denied him.

Some half-hour later a little note was brought to him. It contained a few lines in German, written by Anna von Waldstein.

"She knows me—she forgives me—we are happy. Oh, my friend, thank Heaven for us! I feel I am not worthy to do so. Come to me this evening and I will tell you our plans.

"ANNA VON WALDSTEIN."

He read it, then folded it up, and slowly put it away.

"I must act now," he said; "there will be time enough presently for dreams."

Alexis Kenyon had kept long vigil by her father's side ere at last he opened his eyes and saw her. It seemed to her that, in that first memory of recognition, there was something of terror and apprehension replacing the old idolised tenderness.

She bent over him, all her pride and languor gone now, only an infinite compassion for the present, an intense remorse for the past living in her heart and breathing in her soothing and pitiful words.

Yet her presence seemed to distress him; and when, at his imperative signs, they placed paper and pencil before him once again, he wrote, "Bring Adrian Lyle."

When that message came, the young clergyman smiled bitterly.

"I am not even to have the luxury of solitude," he thought to himself; but, even as he thought it, he felt ashamed of the momentary selfishness it embodied.

A few moments later he was in that dark and mournful room once more—that room where the flower-like beauty and indolence of Alexis Kenyon looked to him so strangely out of place.

Sir Roy's eyes brightened as they rested on Adrian Lyle.

He took the pencil once again, and traced on the sheet of paper before him one word, "Anna."

Adrian Lyle looked at it in amazement. "Anna"? He thought of Anna von Waldstein, but it seemed impossible that Sir Roy should want to see her. He looked doubtfully at the sick man. There was no mistaking the almost frenzied eagerness of that beseeching look.

"Do you mean," he asked, "Madame von Waldstein?"

Sir Roy's lips moved convulsively; then underneath the name he wrote, "alone."

"You wish," asked Adrian Lyle, "to see her alone?"

"Yes, yes," muttered the trembling lips.

More and more bewildered Adrian Lyle turned to Alexis.

"Your father," he said, "wishes to see a lady staying in this hotel, and to see her alone. That is what he has conveyed to me. Shall I bring her?"

"What is her name?" asked Alexis. "Do you know her?"

"Yes," he said gravely. "I know her, but I was not aware your father did."

"You are sure," she asked, "that you have not misunderstood him?"

Adrian Lyle looked again at the agitated face, the agonised entreaty of the watching eyes. "I am sure," he said, "I have not. And though we may not understand his motives, I think we must humour them."

"Very well," said the girl proudly. "He seems to have every confidence in you. I will go into the next room with the nurse, until this mysterious interview is over."

She withdrew at once, and Adrian Lyle went on his errand.

Anna von Waldstein was as much astonished as himself on receiving the message. The name was unknown to her, save through its relationship to Neale Kenyon; but, feeling assured that the summons must concern Gretchen, she accompanied him at once. "The child is asleep," she said softly, as they passed along the carpeted corridor. "I persuaded her to go to bed again. She is so weak and frail, and all her strength seems gone. All that has happened is just like a dream to her; but her mind is as clear and sensible now as ever it was."

"Thank Heaven for that," said Adrian Lyle solemnly. "It is like a miracle."

"I shall thank Heaven," she said humbly, "every hour I live for such a friend as you."

"I!"—and the blood came in a flame to his pale and haggard face. "Oh, no. You must not say that. I have done nothing but my duty. Indeed I wish no thanks."

"I know that," she said, and there were tears in the beautiful, proud eyes. "And I know what 'duty' has cost you. Her eyes are blinded by sorrow; but mine——"

He laid his hand upon her arm with a gesture of entreaty.

"If you are, indeed, a friend," he said brokenly, "say no more. Let me keep my miserable secret unshared to my life's end. So best."

Then he opened the door by which they stood, and the nurse passed out, and he led Anna von Waldstein to the side of that changed and shattered wreck of humanity whose summons had seemed so inexplicable a thing.

"Don't go," she prayed hoarsely, and a shudder of terror shook her frame.

Adrian Lyle looked at the sick man.

"Shall I leave you?" he asked.

There was an imperative sign in the negative.

He turned to the shocked and trembling woman.

"He can understand what you say, but he can only write his answers. Here are pencil and paper. I will retire beyond earshot; if you want me you can call."

He went to the farthest window and stood there looking out at the street below. The faint murmur of the woman's voice; the hoarse, harsh sounds of the sick man's, came to his ear from time to time. Then a rustling of paper, a sudden death-like silence, and, following it a low cry of horror so intense that, instinctively, Adrian Lyle turned towards the bed, and his startled eyes beheld the woman sway suddenly forwards, the paper crushed to her heart; her voice moaning out in piteous accents that it could not be true; anything, anything but that. Had Heaven not punished her enough?

He sprang forwards, then paused, arrested by the change in the sick man's face, by the terrible convulsive workings of the features; the hoarse and unintelligible sounds issuing from the white and quivering lips.

"Our child," that was what they cried; "our child, and I the instrument in God's dread hand to bring her

young head to the dust of shame. Anna—say you forgive—say——"

There was no time for further entreaty. No time, and in very truth no need, for the poor changed face was hidden on a woman's breast, and the clasp of tender and forgiving arms were round that shattered wreck of manhood, and, amidst the passion of her sobs a broken voice wailed out that the past was all forgotten, and every bitter memory washed away in pity; that the heart on which he leaned had never ceased to love him, and never would; that the dark road so long trodden by those proud and haughty feet was fairer than any path of peace, since it had brought her to his side again; and so with tears, and sighs, and broken words those two hearts made their peace, and all their history grew plain; and if sorrow and remorse closed in that closing life, it yet left it hushed, and calmed, and soothed by the tenderest forgiveness that ever man had sued, and ever-suffering womanhood had granted.

Adrian Lyle moved softly back to his post by the distant window. Something was murmuring in his ear; a voice of strange purpose—over and over again like the refrain of a haunting song came its broken words.

"The sins of the fathers—the sins of the fathers——"

Yes; but might there not have been a wise and tender purpose hidden beneath the seeming cruelty of that decree?

Oh, hearts of pride and self-arrogance, who shall dare say "Nay?"

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## CHAPTER II.

### "NEITHER DO I CONDEMN THEE."

At sunset that day Sir Roy Kenyon died.

Adrian Lyle held his secret in his keeping; but he was little likely to betray it to any living creature, least of all to the sorrow-stricken girl, who found

herself alone and unprotected in this first trial of her life.

It struck him as somewhat strange that he should have three women dependent on him at the same time, and that all were individually linked to the dead man's memory by just one act of folly and guilt in his past life.

When, at Anna von Waldstein's request, he went to her rooms that evening, he learnt more fully and completely the circumstances of that past which had had such brief existence—foreshadowed such terrible consequences.

Woman-like, she now had nought but excuse and extenuation for the selfishness which had wrecked her own young life. She had forgiven him—she who alone held the right to blame or accuse. She had loved him blindly and passionately—she had forsaken all others for him; but she had not made him happy. She was proud, wilful, exacting. The dream had been too wild and sweet not to have a sudden and bitter awakening. They drifted apart in spirit long before the actual rupture came. Duty called him to his own home and his own land; she deemed herself deserted and became unreasonable. Hard and cruel words were spoken, words hard to forget, and bearing bitter fruit in long to-morrows that held them apart and estranged. Then came the illness that brought her well-nigh to the gates of death, and her sister's gentle ministry; and lastly, that desperate resolve which gave her back her place in the world at a cost she little recked of then.

All this she poured out to Adrian Lyle's ear in an agony of remorse and humiliation; all this he heard in that character of priest which made such confession sacred, in that sympathy of manhood which was strong enough and brave enough to counsel and help, even though his own heart was wrung with suffering and despair.

"I must go away from here," she said at last, when her pitiful tale was ended, and her tears had ceased to flow, "I and my child. She will never leave me now; we will live for each other in some

place where our history is unknown, where peace and rest may yet be found. I—I could not bear to look upon his child and know that mine is an outcast, and must never know her father's name——"

Adrian Lyle started. "Gretchen is scarcely seventeen, is she?" he asked. "If so, the other daughter——"

"I know," she said, and turned her face aside: "I kuow it to-day for the first time. He was not free; he could not have married me even had the laws of my country been less hard. But he was so unhappy, and I loved him as well as any wife could have done. Only I could not content him. I thiuk I loved him too much for content. Well, I have had my punishment."

Ay, that she had. If ever sin might be expiated by suffering, surely there was hope in Heaveu for this poor sinner, who repented—repented in very dust and ashes of humiliatiou. And Adrian Lyle, listening to her story, and looking on her face, could say not one harsh word.

Let who will blame him—a Christian priest, lending ear of compassion and not of condemnatiou, to such guilt as this. Perhaps he was presumptuous enough only to follow in the meek and lowly footsteps of manhood's first and best Example; perhaps he thought it was no wrong to give hand and trust and fellowship to this sorely-tried and erring sister, saying only, "Neither do I condemn thee—go and sin no more."

The march of events was still rapid for Adrian Lyle. All the melancholy arrangements for the removal of Sir Roy's remains to the Abbey had to be performed, as Alexis wished the funeral to take place there. Lawyers had to be written to, friends and relations informed, and the one woman who had loved him best of all that mourning crowd was the only one who dared not approach, or give any signs of remembrance, save the cross of white lilies that was placed upon his breast by Adrian Lyle's hands.

Gretchen was still so weak and helpless that

removal was out of the question. Her mother watched her in an agony of dread in no way lessened by the grave looks and evasive answers of the medical man whom Adrian Lyle had called in.

It was with a very heavy heart that he accompanied Alexis Kenyon on that melancholy journey homewards. The task in itself was distasteful, leaving out of the question the circumstances under which he had left. But the girl could not travel alone with that melancholy burden, and he felt he must carry still further his principles of self-abnegation.

He left Alexis at the Abbey, where Lady Brereford was already installed, and with a sigh of relief took his way to his old lodging near the church.

The dusk was drawing rapidly on as he walked swiftly down the avenue, and, branching off, took a short cut that led through the park to the village. His feet made no sound on the damp and sodden earth, and as he moved under the dark boughs his figure was scarcely distinguishable. So it was that, coming suddenly face to face with another figure, advancing from the opposite direction, both stopped in mutual curiosity — a curiosity that, on Adrian Lyle's part, was soon satisfied, for he made but one rapid stride, and had seized the man in a grip of iron.

"So, my friend," he exclaimed triumphantly, "we have met again, have we? Good. You will now have the kindness to give me certain information of which I stand in need, and that without delay, or——"

"Or what, Signor Priest?" asked Bari, scoffingly. "I know your English laws. I am not to be threatened with impunity. I know what is law for assault. What is your intention then?"

"My intention," said Adrian Lyle, his hand closing more firmly on the man's collar, "is to know the true reason for your spite against me; then the motives that have led you to betray Mr. Kenyon to his uncle; and, unless by way of still further indulging your amiable weakness, what made you vent your fiendish malignity on the unfortunate girl whom, in conjunction with your master, you so skilfully deceived?"

"And if I refuse to answer the Signor's questions?" demanded Bari with a sneer.

"I shall find means to make you," said Adrian Lyle calmly. "When I first saw your face in Venice, it brought back some memory to my mind, which then I was not able to define very clearly; but I have considered the matter since, and it has occurred to me that, ten years ago in Oxford, a certain Baptiste Leoni had made himself unpleasantly notorious by reason of——"

"Monsieur," interrupted the man in a changed and terrified voice, "there is no need to say more. I will give you the information you desire."

"Ah," said Adrian Lyle quietly, as he looked down at the shrinking, ashy face, "I thought we should come to terms before long. So the sword still hangs over your head, my friend, changed as are your name and appearance. You are scarcely wise, then, to set foot in England, even though so long a time has passed. But to business. While in the pay of Mr. Kenyon as his servant, you conveyed private information to his uncle, Sir Roy, of his conduct? Is it not so?"

"Yes," answered Bari sulkily. Below his breath he muttered, "This priest is a devil, he knows everything."

"The details, however," continued Adrian Lyle, "were not always strictly correct. But let that pass. Why did you spy on the nephew for the purpose of supplying the uncle with information?"

"Why?" repeated the man—"*mais, ma foi*, why? Monsieur might know the reason without asking. It was to my advantage."

"And was it," asked his interrogator, "to your advantage to assist in the disgraceful project by which an innocent child was ruined?"

"I was commissioned by Sir Roy to see that his nephew got into no entanglement—serious, that is to say. It was understood that he was to marry Miss Kenyon, and I did my duty accordingly."

"Your duty! Scoundrel, thief, spy that you are! How dare you pollute that word by your meaning? I

see your motives clearly enough now. You were in the pay of both; and you played the one against the other. Well, one paymaster has failed you—Sir Roy Kenyon is dead; and, before his nephew takes his place here, I warn you that he shall hear from my lips the whole of your double-dealing. We will see then what you will gain in the future. Miss Kenyon knows everything; your information then is valueless, and your master's secret has been published to the world at large in this recent trial. You have played your cards badly after all; and if you are on your way to the Abbey now, I give you warning that you will be turned from the door ignominiously. Your plot against myself is clear enough; you sent me to Mrs. Kenyon on a false errand, in order to——"

"Mrs. Kenyon!" cried Bari, in a sudden rage and fury that got the better of his cowardice. "Ha ha! a fine Mrs.— she. Breaking her vows, leaving her home at voice of the first man who asks her. My faith, yes. She to bo a victim? Why, if not Mr. Kenyon, it would have been another. It was in her; she is of her mother's blood! Oh, a fine innocent, yes——"

"You scoundrel!" muttered Adrian Lyle hoarsely, "don't dare breathe a word against her as you valuo your life! You forget that I know you; a word from me, and that old crime may still be brought home. If I show you mercy, it is not that you deserve it, but simply to spare pain to others. But listen; you shall take yourself out of England without delay; you shall swear never to molest or importune Miss Kenyon or —tho lady, who, in my eyes, has every right to be considered your master's wife. If you fail to promise this or to fulfil it, I shall give the police that hint which onco might have been so useful. You best know how it will servo you now, or what you havo to fear from revelations of your past."

Again that grey, hard look came over Bari's face. His eyes flashed hatred, black and bitter as his own heart, at the noble face and kingly form that towered above him. Useless to measure physical or mental force, and yet to confess himself beaten. For a moment he was silent, balancing in his mind the

contending advantages of defiance or safety. The sting of truth in Adrian Lyle's words made him doubly furious. He had indeed played his cards badly. In his anxiety to reap the rich harvests thrown in his way, he had thought to make the young clergyman but a tool for his own skill to fashion and to use. Instead of that, he had to acknowledge himself beaten off the field. The very air he breathed seemed to narrow and contract about him; the long-hidden terrors of a guilty past sprang back to life, and bade him be cautious ere he defied his antagonist now.

He drew a deep breath—he made one last effort at assertion. "I suppose," he said, "you will make it worth my while if I give the promise."

The suggestion seemed to arouse Adrian Lyle to such fury as the man could scarcely credit. His face flushed; his eyes grew black with wrath. The hand which still clenched tight on Bari's collar shook him to and fro in a sudden impulse of passion.

"Cur and cheat that you are," he cried between his set teeth, "never one farthing of mine shall bribe you to that which justice demands as a right. Take your ill-gotten gains and rid this country of your presence before another sun has set, or by the might of Heaven above you shall repent the hour you refused my mercy."

The man raised his chill and bloodless face to the lowering sky.

"Mercy!" he echoed in a strange and far-off voice. "The mercy of a priest? Ha! ha! it's the first time I have heard of it."

"Take care," said Adrian Lyle, releasing him and pointing straight down the dark and sombre path, "that it is not the last. There lies your way, take it. I pray I may never see your face again."

Bari turned, and, like a beaten hound, slunk, and cowed, cringing out of sight amidst the falling shadows; and Adrian Lyle—his breast heaving with stormy passion, all the loyalty, and strength, and uprightness of his nature in revolt against this miserable traitor—stood there for long, doing battle with himself and the feelings that this man always

roused, feelings which he told himself were less temperate and forbearing than his office demanded; but not inexcusable in face of the provocation received.

"And there is still another," he thought in his heart, as he remembered that even now Neale Kenyon's face might be set homewards. "Heaven give me strength and patience. The hardest trial of my life must soon be met."

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## CHAPTER III.

### "TILL DEATH CLAIM ONE OR OTHER.'

When Adrian Lyle reached his old rooms that night, he found them warm and bright with fire and lamplight, and his old landlady looking eagerly out to welcome him.

It seemed so long since he had had any sort of home or any sort of welcome, that the strangeness and the comfort almost brought tears to his eyes. When he entered the little sitting-room the cloth was laid, a basket of scarlet tulips made a brilliant spot of colour in the centre, and home-made bread and cake and other dainties were spread in lavish abundance for his evening meal. As his eye turned from these hospitable preparations they rested on a letter laid on his plate. He glanced at the superscription, and his heart fluttered like a girl's.

How well he knew that delicate, foreign hand; its small, clear letters and regular strokes. He put the letter in his breast-pocket, intending to read it when he was alone. He had not the heart to ignore the motherly old landlady's kind attentions, or turn a deaf ear to her warm congratulations on his reappearance. However, she ceased fussing at last, and left him to drink his tea in comfort.

Then he drew his chair near the fire, and took the letter out, and broke the seal with trembling fingers.

"Dear Mr. Lyle," it said, "I hear you have left the hotel. Perhaps I may not see you again, for I am

going away from here to-morrow with my mother. But I cannot go away without telling you how grateful I am for all you have done for me and for her. I do not deserve such a friend. Heaven knows what might have chanced to me but for you! These words seem so cold, and it is so hard for me to express what I would desire to say; but you must know what is in my heart, and in all this sad and terrible trouble I think, but for you, I should have died. Looking back now, it seems I always saw you, or heard your voice; and even in the darkness and the cloud and the terror your face looked out at me and bid me hope. . . And yet, when I think of you—so strong—so great—so good—it seems more than wonderful that you should ever have thought of me at all, still more that you should have taken so much trouble for me, as I learn from my mother's lips you have taken. . You know all my history now, Mr. Lyle. There is nothing in my life hidden from you, and the fact that you can forgive me and still be my friend seems to lift my soul up to Hope once more. . But, dear Mr. Lyle, I know now that I have no right or claim upon your friendship any longer. I am a wicked fellow-creature in the eyes of all good men and women. I am not fit to touch your hand or listen to your voice. Every day—every hour—this knowledge comes more and more home to me. The very attendants in this hotel look askance when they come into my room, as if they saw all my miserable story branded on my face. . . Mr. Lyle, I cannot bear it so I am going away, I and my mother; and this is to bid you good-bye, and to beg you to forgive me if you can, and not to try to see me again. Oh, it is very hard to say that, but it is my duty, for I have done you only harm, and I can never do you anything else, or be anything but a disgrace to your generous and noble friendship.

"But it is not for me. . I never should have accepted it. I see that now. . The scorn of others would strike at you for my sake, and I could not, oh, I could not bear—that. . . Don't think I say this without knowing what I say. A woman who has gone through what I have gone through has lived her

life by hours of suffering; . . and I, though I seem so young, I feel old, as no age could make me. I and my mother are happy now, and it is to you we owe our happiness; but we must not spoil your life any longer. We both see that, and so we will go our way, and, though we shall never, never forget you and all you have done for us, we think it is best not to tell you where we are going; only to say that every day we live we shall pray for you, and think of you as the noblest and best man that the world holds. And now farewell. "GRETCHEN.

"P.S.—I add these lines to say that if ever he comes back, it is best you know nothing of me, and that I only wish you to say that I never wish to see him again; that now I know him as he is, I could not bear to look on his face and remember that old happy time when I thought he loved me as I loved him; that is all my last message. I forgive him; but I will not of my own will see him ever again; only I hold myself his wife till death claim one or other."

The letter dropped from Adrian Lyle's hands; only those last words rang in his ears as though he heard her own voice speaking them: "Till death claim one or other."

And meanwhile he must take up the old, heavy, weary burden of life, uncheered by any hope of seeing that sweet face, of hearing that tender voice, whose faintest echo thrilled his heart as never woman's voice had done, or could do again.

He picked up the sheets that had fluttered to the ground; they seemed like sentient things, and there was pain, keen as torture, in their very touch. He pushed aside his untasted tea, and leaned his elbows on the table, and bent his head down on his trembling hands, and tried to think clearly, calmly, of what had come to him.

He did not blame her; he could not. She had acted rightly and generously. His nature understood hers too well for even a moment's misconception; but all the same she had taken the very surest way of endearing herself still more to his memory, and of

adding a fresh ache to his suffering heart. To have taken herself out of his life; how hard it seemed! so hard that he felt instinctively it must have been right since it bore Duty's indelible stamp; so hard, that as he thought of it—of grey, sad days, of long nights uncheered by hope of any glad to-morrow—it seemed as if he had no strength left to bear his burden any longer; that he must creep aside to some lonely and forgotten place and there cast it down, and himself beside it, and pray for death and peace.

Moments passed, but he took no heed, only sat there looking through a mist of tears and pain at the delicate, clear words that had told him his doom so tenderly, and yet so cruelly.

The sorrow and the beauty of that wasted life came home to him as never had it done yet. He seemed to read the torture of the girl's frank, innocent soul, brought face to face with the degradation she had at last realised. He could do nothing for her any more. She shrank even from seeing him; like a hounded creature, she had chosen to drag herself away into lowliness and darkness, there to suffer and endure till time should ease, or death release her.

That act of voluntary martyrdom touched him, as a child's act of sublime folly sometimes touches hearts that have placed reason on a higher level than feeling. He knew how she had clung to him, trusted to him; thought, acted, reasoned as he had directed. And now, because she feared to wrong his friendship, she had cast herself adrift without hesitation. It was overwrought; it was unwise; but he knew it was noble; and he knew, too, that in some sense she shared his pain, and realised the cost of her voluntary sacrifice, though she could never, never realise what that cost was to him.

He put the letter in his breast. Its tender regrets seemed to thrill him with mingled hope and dread, but the echo of those last words it held beat in his brain for many a weary day to come. "Till death claim one or other." For an awful fear flitted like a pale ghost before him this morning, of that changed and wasted face, and his heart prayed without ceasing, "Not her, O Heaven—not her."

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL.

THE next morning brought Mr. Bray to Adrian Lyle's rooms in person, to beg him to reconsider his resolution, and once again resume his old duties.

At first the younger man listened in silence, feeling that he had little inclination for argument, and little strength for refusal; but gradually it dawned upon him that if he wished to see Neale Kenyon he had better remain where he was, and that work and occupation were preferable to idleness, and might in some way serve to lighten the length and weariness of days to come. He ended, therefore, by agreeing with the old Rector's wishes, and once more resumed the duties he had laid aside.

How he lived through the days and weeks that followed he scarcely knew. He came and went; he was as patient, as helpful, as unselfish as ever he had been in all matters of ministration and usefulness; but there were times when thought would not be lulled to rest; times when the day's work was over, and he would go home to face dark and lonely hours, or seek his couch and lay himself down blind and sick with pain, groaning in the bitterness of his soul's anguish, "How long, O Heaven, how long?"

Sometimes he felt that to live like this was so unnatural that he could not bear up against it; that the strongest physical force must give way; and he would become hopeless of his own endurance. But taxed as that endurance was, it bore the strain nobly and heroically; bore it for the sake of duty yet to be performed—certainly for no hope that the fulfilment of such duty would ever bring reward.

As he thought of the bitter mysteries of life he thought also, "she has to bear this pain as well as I," and then her face would live before his aching eyes in all its changed, sad beauty, and the longing to see it once more became well-nigh unbearable.

But the weary month came to an end at last, and

each day he expected to hear that Neale Kenyon had arrived.

He had never been to the Abbey since Sir Roy's funeral. He knew Alexis was there with Lady Breresford, but he kept away, even though the elder lady had invited him more than once.

He never imagined how the proud girl's heart craved for the mere sound of his voice; how easily he might have lightened these days of mourning for her; with what a leap of pulses she had learnt that he had resumed his duties and was at his old post once more. But it is a strange fact that the routine of life—once broken—rarely, if ever, can be taken up and resumed as of old. And the frank and pleasant intercourse between Adrian Lyle and herself could never be replaced on its previous footing, however much she might desire it.

But she would not acknowledge this yet. She had faith in time, and perhaps in her own power to charm. She knew she must humble her pride to win Adrian Lyle's forgiveness, but she was ready enough to do that now. Sorrow and regret had touched her heart; shame had swept with hot breath across the icy calm and perfect culture of her enchanted garden. She had been moved from the serenity of self-consciousness, and remorse and regret had broken down the very barriers she had deemed invincible, and left her painfully aware that her fate was no more to be controlled by her desires, or bounded by her own judgment, than that of any other fallible creature who owns the gift of life.

She too waited with impatience and resentment the arrival of her cousin. She had resolved to break off the engagement between them, though such an act necessitated her giving up her old home. The caprice that had led her to accept him had borne bitter fruit, and she could not but acknowledge the fact. But for that this disgrace would have been averted, and Neale might now be free to make that mock marriage a reality.

The cowardice of his conduct disgusted her. She had studied every word of that trial, and her heart

had grown hot with rage and indignation as she had read of the sufferings endured by the unfortunate girl whose fate had hung in so tragic a balance. Of the inner secrets of that story, of her father's connection with it, and the still more painful circumstances that had led to his death, she was happily ignorant.

Two people only could have told her these facts, and the lips of one were sealed by honour, and the lips of the other by shame; so the proud head might still lift itself up with the old defiance, unknowing of the horrors it had escaped.

Thus the days drifted by, and the time was at hand when the arrival of the *Orient*, bearing Neale Kenyon's name on its list of passengers, might be confidently expected.

The night before he was to arrive at the Abbey, Alexis received a note from Adrian Lyle, requesting her to ask her cousin to call on him at his earliest convenience, as he had a matter of importance to communicate. Alexis resolved to send Neale at once to him, as she preferred the young man should hear this story from the lips of one of his own sex.

She felt a curious disinclination to see him again. The cowardice and meanness of his conduct revolted her. It had offended her taste; it had outraged her dignity She felt she could neither forgive nor excuse it; but perhaps the sharpest sting it held for her was that on account of it she had for once lost self-command, dignity, serenity, all on which she most prided herself, and forgotten them before Adrian Lyle. All he said to her on that night was like a persistent echo in her ear. Never, as long as she lived, could she forget it, or her own after remorse.

Thus it happened that when Neale Kenyon arrived, dusty, tired, worn with his long, fatiguing journey and the haste he had made, his only welcome at the Abbey was the news of Sir Roy's death, communicated by the old butler, and a few curt lines from Alexis saying she did not feel equal to seeing him, and enclosing Adrian Lyle's request.

Neale read the two notes in a stupefied, bewildered way. The news of his uncle's death was a

great shock to him. He had never expected it, and naturally associated it at once with the urgent message that had brought him home. The change it would make in his own fortunes and position did not occur to him so readily as might have been expected.

He sat down in the library in the dusk of the mild February day, and read and re-read those two brief, cold notes with a very heavy heart. He felt instinctively that they foreboded no good, and he knew he would rather have had an interview with any one in the world than with Adrian Lyle.

He roused himself at last. There was a tray containing wine and biscuits on the table, and he poured himself out two or three glasses, and drank them off rapidly. "I may as well get it over," he said, and, without word or message for his cousin, he left the Abbey, and took his way to the village.

The peace, the beauty, the fragrant English air, the new fresh grass of the fields, the rich brown of the ploughed earth, all smote his senses with that gladness of nature that is more akin to pain—so sunny, and oft-times so sad, are its associations.

The sun was just sinking behind a range of distant hills, the dying notes of a bird's song came clear and sweet on the soft spring air. Neale Kenyon heard it with a sudden pang of remembrance, for a bird's song always reminded him of Gretchen—always brought back a picture of blossoming woods, and the ripple of water, and a young girl's face—itself an embodiment of spring—bent over the wild field-daisies in her lap. He hurried on, impatient of such remembrance now, though he wondered what Adrian Lyle would say when he found that his conduct with regard to the girl was known.

"Poor little Gretchen!" he thought now, half sadly, half regretfully; "but, of course, it must have had an end some time. Those follies can't last. But I was awfully in love with her once. Well, she's changed too, that's one comfort. I'm afraid I behaved badly, but what could I do? She was regularly thrown at me by those curmudgeons. I had to get her away from them, and there was no such thing as

getting married in that cursed country. However, as things have turned out, that's no matter for regret. I suppose I must marry Alexis now, and settle down into a regular country squire. Well, I've plenty of inducements here."

The soliloquy ended with a complacent glance over the surrounding country, a feeling that it was not in human nature to regret the choice that had made him owner of a splendid estate, even if it were saddled with a wife so exigeant and difficult of comprehension as Alexis Kenyon.

"She's thorough-bred, every inch," he mused; "she'll reign here like a queen. I shall be very proud of her, and she must have been fond of me, or she'd never have consented to an engagement. A girl who might have been a princess, too!"

By which reasoning it will be perceived that Neale Kenyon's views had somewhat altered during his absence in India, and his association with that gay and gallant regiment, the —th, to whom all women meant fair game, provided they had the ammunition to bring them down.

With pleasant visions of proprietorship and patronage, of royal expenditure and unstinted enjoyment, he beguiled the long road to the village, and arrived at Adrian Lyle's door just as the sun had sunk out of sight, and the faint primrose hue of twilight was softly falling over the quiet street and the spire of the grey old church.

He was told Mr. Lyle was in, and the old woman led him to the parlour with many respectful curtseys and congratulations dropped by the way, and all of which were soothing to his new sense of dignity and importance.

The room was dimly lighted by a fire in the low, old-fashioned grate, and as the young man advanced he saw a figure sitting beside it, a figure that, aroused by his entrance, rose straight and stern, and with so awful a change on the remembered features, that for a moment Neale Kenyon scarcely recognised the face as that of the man he had known and feared, and now defied.

In silence the two faces looked back at each other, the words that each had framed as greeting seeming to fail them utterly. It was Neale Kenyon who first resumed his self-command. Adrian Lyle leant heavily against the mantel-shelf by which he stood; every limb trembled; the feelings let loose within his heart seemed to stifle him—only when he heard that remembered voice did power and self-control return.

"I have received your message," said Neale Kenyon curtly. "What is it you want with me?"

"What?"—the blood flushed in a burning tide to Adrian Lyle's face. "You dare," he said, "to pretend ignorance? I want to know the reason of the lie you told me that night in Rome, and repeated as truth here when we met again. That is the first thing. Afterwards——"

"Oh," said Neale coolly, "never mind about—afterwards. If you have only sent for me to go over that old story, you have wasted your time. I am not accountable to you or to any man for my actions."

A blow would not have conveyed deeper insult than those words, nor fired Adrian Lyle's blood as did their insolent defiance. He made one rapid stride across the room, turned the key in the door, and then put it in his pocket. Having done this he seized Neale Kenyon, and with a strength that seemed superhuman, he forced him into a chair and held him there pinioned, and powerless as a child in his strong and passionate grasp.

"Now listen," he said, "coward and traitor that you are! Learn the fruits of your selfish passion, and then dare to repeat to my face that you are not accountable for it;" and in words, every one keen as a barbed arrow, he spoke out the whole terrible truth of that tragedy of shame; he painted the picture of betrayal—misery—madness—guilt—in colours so strong and frightful, that the young man shrank aghast and trembling from the horrors it represented.

Adrian Lyle had reached that extreme point of suffering when the knowledge of another's pain gives almost mental joy; every line of that shrinking face he read and joyed to read—all the horror and self-

accusation of those broken words were sweet as music to his ears.

He did not spare his enemy one detail; he showed him his name and high estate pilloried by the world's knowledge of his secret; the world's scorn of his cowardice; he showed him the blood of his child crying dumbly from its unknown grave; the broken heart, the lost reason of the deceived girl calling for judgment on her betrayer. He told him in words of scathing contempt how every honourable and right-feeling man would regard him now; he wrested away with ruthless hand all self-excuse, all sophistry that would fain have pictured as "a foolish romance," or an "error of youth," the sin he had committed in the eyes of Heaven. He pictured too clearly for any extenuation the irremediable evil he had wrought, and left him weak, and terrified, and robbed of every shred of vindication; a trembling coward, shrinking, with hidden eyes and ashen face, from that towering form that breathed out strength, and justice, and wrath with all the majesty of right, and all the passion of a cherished vengeance. But, even now, Adrian Lyle knew that that vengeance eluded him.

He could do nothing; that was the bitterest pang of all. Even in this hour, when at last accuser and accused stood face to face, what satisfaction was gained? None, none, none! so cried his heart.

The fury of his just wrath spent itself for nothing, save the sight of that crushing shame, the knowledge that never again in life would Neale Kenyon lift up his head and defy him with insolent pride; never could he forget the humiliation of this one hour, or cease to feel its shadow upon the future he had deemed so safe and prosperous a thing.

But for himself—Adrian Lyle's hand suddenly relaxed its hold—his anger seemed to stand forth as a poor, vain thing, unworthy the dignity of manhood and priesthood, and the sacred calling that was his.

He moved away from that shrinking form, and sank exhausted and conscience-stricken into his own chair. There was a long and terrible silence. Neale Kenyon felt that speech was almost an impossibility.

What in all the gamut of human language could express the agony of his soul, the humiliation that crushed him to the dust before this man who had read him as Heaven might read him; whose grand and spotless life was in itself an unspoken reproach to the cowardly selfishness of his own?

He was thankful for the darkness of the room; he could not have met that fierce, accusing gaze. His brain grew dizzy beneath the weight of conflicting feeling and conflicting thoughts. He felt stifling, choked; the room seemed closing in upon him. He rose blindly to his feet and stretched his hands out to the darkness and the silence.

"Let me go," he cried hoarsely; "I must have air—I feel stifled. I never dreamt of this; never, as Heaven judges me. I will go to her; it is not too late. I will sacrifice my future—my life, if need be. Oh, for Heaven's sake, Lyle, let me go! Tell me where she is!"

Then Adrian Lyle lifted his face from the gathering shadows, and the gleam of the firelight showed its changed and wasted features, from which all wrath had fled.

"I cannot tell you," he said. "I do not know myself. But this I can say, it is not her wish ever to see your face again, though she will hold herself your wife till—death."

In those words that spoke his own doom there was pain so infinite that Neale Kenyon could not doubt their truth for a single moment.

Even reparation was taken from his hands. He felt stunned, and bewildered, and full of struggling fears, each one of which showed more deadly harm dealt by his hand in the past, confronting him like a monument of dread and evil in the future.

"If she is ill, suffering, in want," he cried aloud, "O Heaven, be merciful to her! On me let thy judgment fall."

"Your prayer, like your repentance, comes too late to save her whom you have wronged," said Adrian Lyle. "Nothing can restore what you robbed, in very wantonness of an idle hour. Go your way now.

My mission is accomplished. Almost I could pray Heaven our paths may never meet in life again!"

He moved forwards blindly, uncertainly; he flung open the door, and the light from the passage beyond shone on either face.

As Neale Kenyon looked on him a great wave of pity swept over his heart, and his eyes seemed suddenly dim. Instinctively he stretched out his hand; but then let it slowly drop.

"No," he muttered hoarsely, "I'm not worthy to touch your hand. I know it now." Then his eyes sank, his voice grew low and indistinct. "Would to Heaven," he cried brokenly, "that she had loved—you!"

And with those words he went out into the darkness and silence of the night, leaving Adrian Lyle alone once more with the memory of his hour of vengeance.

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## CHAPTER V.

### REMORSE.

Neale Kenyon staggered blindly forth into the cool, dark night. His frame was shaking like a leaf; his brain throbbed as if with fever. All around him in the quiet earth—the quiet heavens—accusing faces crowded, and accusing voices cried.

He had murdered the innocent—he had wrecked and ruined the sweetest, purest life that ever Heaven had created. Her face looked back at him now—her face, O Heaven!—with her murdered child in her arms, and the prison taint upon her innocent brow!

He groaned aloud in his agony. When he reached the shelter of the woods he threw himself down beneath the trees, and lived again through the shame and horror of that last hour. Already it seemed far away—crowded out by terrible revelations, by overmastering fear, by resolves wild and futile; but ever and always before his shrinking gaze passed that slender white-robed figure with her reproachful eyes, and the emblem of life-long shame at her fair young breast.

"I will find her," he cried despairingly. "I will atone. It is not yet too late. We are young—the future is still before us. The world is wide. We will go where no one knows her miserable story, and my share in it. Every day I live shall be an atonement for these fearful months, and she will forget in time—she loved me so, and love does not alter so soon—she loved me, and she will love me again. O Heaven, be merciful, and lead me to her side once more!"

Thus he lamented and promised—trying vainly and weakly to anticipate good results even now from past evil—trying also to believe that the effects of cruelty and cowardice might be swept into forgetfulness by a few penitent words—by the claims of an old passion that he himself had forsworn, and turned into a torturing and degrading memory to her.

"I did not mean to harm her. I never dreamt of consequences like this!" he cried again and again in unavailing self-reproach.

Probably not. But he had to learn, as many another had learnt before him, and will learn after him, that it is not possible to determine the extent of an evil once it is committed—to stay its course within given bounds—to limit it to a circumscribed distance.

It has been wisely said that there is a terrible coercion in our deeds—a coercion which may turn even an honest man into a villain and reconcile him to the change.

Truly, as Neale Kenyon looked back, now, on that stained past, it seemed incredible that so much suffering could have arisen out of so trivial a commencement. He seemed to hear the echo of his own voice again in the spring woods of Dornbach—"Don't wake Lisschen; come up here and talk to me"—and from that one incident had sprung the tragedy that had wrecked and spoilt so many lives.

The night grew darker. A soft, fine rain began to fall, and he heard the drops pattering through the leaves, and felt them on his hair as he lay face downwards on the damp, brown earth. Some sense of where he was—of the necessities of his position—came creeping back in a weak and feeble fashion

to his aching brain. He rose to his feet, and stood with his face upturned to the veiled and starless sky. He shuddered as the warm drops touched his brow—they seemed like blood—the blood that his accuser had declared was on his guilty soul, and for which the God of Justice would call him to account.

All his heart grew wild and hot within him—filled now with but one longing, intense as hope of life to the doomed, as hope of mercy to the guilty—the longing to fall at Gretchen's feet and confess his sin, to read pity and forgiveness in her soft, sweet eyes—to take her hand in his, and so face life and its necessities and duties once again, having made such late restitution as honour demanded, and won back his place in the faithful heart that had indeed loved him far too well.

That resolution seemed to ease his pain and his remorse. The tears of weakness and misery that wet his cheeks were indeed the baptism of a sincere and heart-felt repentance; and so, feebly and wearily, with haggard face and stained, dishevelled dress he groped his way through the avenue of his newly-acquired possessions, a strange and pitiable sight.

He reached the Abbey, and mechanically took his way to the library windows which opened on to the terrace. They were closed and fastened for the night, but as his hands feebly grasped the outer handle of the door the curtains within were swept aside, and a face looked back to his. The light of the lamp fell full on its white and delicate beauty. He saw it was the face of his cousin.

In a moment the door was open, and he entered.

Alexis gave a faint cry of terror as she saw that spectral, ghastly face, wet, earth-stained, and disordered.

"What has happened?" she cried faintly as he staggered to a chair, and fell, rather than seated, himself in it.

He looked up, his eyes were wild and vacant. He pushed the hair from off his brow in a dim, confused way.

"A great deal has—happened," he muttered at last. "I have seen myself in a new light. Do I look like a murderer, Alexis?"

The girl recoiled. A fear sharp and terrible struck to her heart. What had he done? Had he seen Adrian Lyle? Had they quarrelled? or——

She could not put the thought into words. "Tell me," she cried faintly, "what you mean. Are you mad?"

"Perhaps," he said, and dropped his hands and looked at them with something of the same strangeness in the gesture that had once been in Gretchen's.

Alexis grew really alarmed. She went up to him and shook him by the arm. "Neale," she cried again, "rouse yourself. Tell me what is the matter. Have you seen Mr. Lyle? Have you heard?——"

"Yes," he said, "I have heard—everything. Did I not tell you I was a murderer?"

"Hush!" she entreated. "You judge yourself too harshly. Of course, there is much to blame, but how could you imagine consequences so disastrous?"

He shook off her hand, and looked at her with scorn, and almost, she thought, with horror. "For Heaven's sake," he cried hoarsely, "cease paltering between right and wrong. Let us call things by their names, as—as Adrian Lyle does. I have been a fool, a brute, a coward. If I have not wilfully taken a life, at least I have destroyed all that made its existence of any worth. I have wronged you, too, Alexis; but that is a small sin in comparison with that other. Whether you forgive me or not won't break my heart, or pain your own; but she——"

He broke down, and buried his face in his hands.

Alexis drew back from his side, hurt and indignant.

Again she found herself of no account when placed beside the memory of this fair-faced girl, whom her eyes had never seen, but whose fate seemed destined to throw its shadow across her own serene and egoistic life. Again her pride suffered, and her dignity rose in arms at the slight put upon herself. That old expression of scorn and indifference swept away the momentary softness of her face.

"I am quite aware," she said, with her cruellest irony, "that I am of no consequence whatever, in comparison with the claims and charms of this German peasant, whose taste for melodramatic display has dragged an honoured name into the mire of public scandal; but you seem to forget you have given me a right to resent your conduct, and that I am not likely to brook further insult, because you choose to indulge in a visionary remorse."

The hardness and cruelty of her words stung Neale Kenyon to the quick, but they brought to the surface all that was best in his weak and unstable nature. He rose feebly and unsteadily; but his face was calm, and his voice firm.

"Alexis," he said, "you always professed to despise the weakness of your sex. I don't ask your pity for myself or another, but at least I will not allow you to insult her in my presence; and I tell you this: that our poor pretence of an engagement had best end at once. You never cared for me, and why you accepted me as your husband I fail to understand; but only one woman in this world has a right to be my wife, and that woman I will seek through the length and breadth of the earth, so only that I may win her forgiveness, and repair the wrong I have done in the past."

Alexis Kenyon's face grew white as death; her eyes blazed with sudden fury; her small hands clenched tight on each other, as she tried to stifle her rage and command her voice.

"Did Mr. Lyle," she asked with cutting scorn, "teach you these heroic sentiments?"

Neale Kenyon's brow flushed dusky red. "No," he cried indignantly. "He does not even know where she is."

Then cruel and clear on the silence of the room rang out that slighting, mercileſs laugh.

"You believe that," she cried. "Ah, fool that you are! He not know; he, whose every hour of leisure has been passed at her side; he, to whom she owes liberty and life; he, the guardian angel of her destiny; he, to whom she owes a debt her life could scarcely

pay; he, who loves her as you cannot even conceive love. He not know! Say rather he is too wise to tell you, till your fit of remorse is over; for he, least of any man, would desire to see this girl your wife!"

She spoke with a bitterness, a scathing fury that held her cousin spell-bound. He sank back in his chair trembling, and weak, and speechless. But in his heart he felt she was wrong. He knew that in whatever light Adrian Lyle regarded Gretchen, he had spoken the truth when he had declared his entire ignorance of her present abode.

He found voice at last, and strength too to do justice to a nature whose nobility he had always recognised, but never so fully and completely as on this night.

"You are wrong, Alexis," he said wearily; "you don't understand Adrian Lyle, though you pride yourself on your skill at reading character. He is far too noble and far too brave to lie to any man. He told me the truth, and I know it pained him to do it. He has no more knowledge of Gretchen now than I have; believe it or not, as you choose, but it is the truth, and with it I think this discussion had better end. To-morrow I will tell you what are my plans; only of one thing rest assured. Your father wished this to be your home, and your home it shall be. I will never live here—now. Whether you remain or not makes no difference. My sin has exiled me, and I will bear its burden without complaint; but you least of any one should blame me for an effort at atonement. You are a woman, and might surely pity one so cruelly wronged, and who has suffered so much at my hands as Gretchen has."

There was such a ring of genuine feeling in his voice that it might have touched any heart; but if it touched Alexis Kenyon's, she, at least, did not betray it. Her comprehension of the frailties and crosses of human nature told her plainly enough that her cousin was sincere in his remorse; but the sense that she herself could be so calmly set aside made her relentless.

The memory of that hateful scandal swept over her like fire, and burnt up all of sympathy and softness

that its pathetic incidents might have compelled. And for this girl—this thing of shame who had slept in a prison cell and stood in a criminal's dock—all the ancient glories of her house and name were to be sacrificed.

The thought stung her like a scorpion. She moved coldly away to the door, and, standing, looked back at the man whom she despised for his weakness and hated for his acknowledgment of its future results.

"You are very generous with the gift that accident has brought you," she said; "but you make a great mistake if you imagine I will accept from your hands what has ceased to be mine by right. Neither would I for one moment deprive you of the additional glory that may yet be yours when you instal here, as mistress, the partner of your miserable intrigue. You will be a worthy pair to carry out the traditions of a stainless name and an ancient lineage!"

Then the door closed on her, and shut in the indignant face and bitter, humiliated heart in which the arrow of her speech had gone straight home, and in which its poison rankled to the exclusion of more generous feelings.

His very lips grew livid; a storm of rage passed quivering over him.

"And I wondered once," he cried, "how men could murder women!"

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## CHAPTER VI.

### I HAVE GIVEN MY PROMISE.

When his servant came to his room next morning, Neale Kenyon was in a burning fever. As the day wore on, he became so much worse that the doctor telegraphed to London for another medical man.

Alexis had resolved to leave the Abbey that day, but under the circumstances she felt she ought to remain at least until the fever had reached its turning-point. But she was intensely miserable and ill at ease.

A strange and unconquerable resolve had rooted itself in her mind, and she had determined on its

accomplishment from the moment that Neale Kenyon's mad words had stung her to the quick the previous night.

"He could not have meant them," she told herself, as she heard the wild ravings and mutterings proceeding from the sick-room. "The fever must have been coming on even then. When it leaves him he will have forgotten all about that Quixotic idea of restitution. It can do no harm if I pave the way."

So a telegram was despatched to Scotland Yard, and the next morning a quiet, grave-looking personage was closeted with Miss Kenyon for a long time, and received certain instructions from her that he promised to carry out.

The grave personage did not come again, but at the end of the week Miss Kenyon announced that she was going away on business, and she left Lady Breresford in charge at the Abbey, and, taking her French maid with her, went up to London, and drove straight to Claridge's, where rooms were ready for her.

In the evening the grave personage called to see her, and was with her for a very brief time. He left, however, with an extremely satisfied face and a cheque for three figures in his pocket-book.

At eight o'clock next morning, Alexis Kenyon left the hotel unaccompanied and dressed very plainly. At the top of Bond Street she called a cab, and gave the man some directions. He drove towards Knightsbridge, and there she got out and dismissed him with double fare, at which he stared in wonder, and expressed an opinion that she was "a stunner."

Alexis then entered the Park by the Albert Gate, and walked slowly along the footpath skirting the Row. It was almost deserted at that early hour, but presently she saw a solitary figure hurrying along, and involuntarily her own steps quickened, and the colour came into her face. It was a slender, shabbily-dressed figure, the face almost hidden by a large shady hat; but Alexis Kenyon seemed to recognise it instinctively, and moving straight towards it, stopped short a few paces off, and spoke out a name.

The face beneath the broad concealing hat was

suddenly lifted. The eyes, dark as darkest violets, and strangely mournful, even in the startled wonder they expressed, looked straight at her.

"Madame," the girl said faintly, "you . . . I fear you mistake. I have not the honour to know you."

"You are Gretchen von Waldstein, are you not?" demanded her interlocutor.

The fair, sweet face lifted itself up, a burning wave of colour surged through the delicate skin. "Yes," she answered faintly; "and you, Madame?"

"Who I am matters little just now," was the curt rejoinder. "I have something to say to you, and I must say it. I know you are going to your morning engagement, but that must wait for once. Will you walk with me over there, where it is quiet, under the trees? This road is too public for conversation."

"But," stammered the girl, "what can you have to say to me? I do not even know you."

"My name," said her unceremonious acquaintance, "is Kenyon—Alexis Kenyon. Do you know me now?"

The girl's face grew like marble. A look of terror intense and keen with pain leaped into her lovely eyes. She shrank back as if a blow had struck her, and only gazed speechless and trembling at the cold and perfect beauty of the face before her.

"Come," said Alexis impatiently, and made a gesture in the direction of the trees. "I see you know me. You do not suppose that I should have sought this interview without good reason. Will you hear what I have come to say?"

The girl bent her head submissively The colour came back to her face in a hot, shamed flood; she felt bewildered—stupefied; a look of intense suffering drew her brows together in a line of pain, and her lips quivered convulsively.

Yet the sign of that suffering awoke no pity in the eyes that read it all too plainly, nor in any way moved that unflinching will which had set itself a task, and was now bent on accomplishing it.

In silence they moved along under the glitter of sunshine, which fell warm and golden with the

promise of spring over the bare trees and the green up-springing grass.

There was a seat beneath the trees to which Alexis had directed her steps, and she pointed to it as her eyes turned again to that wan and sad young face.

"Sit down," she said; "it will look less conspicuous."

The girl obeyed in the same dull, automatic manner that had characterised her since she had heard her companion's name.

Alexis Kenyon scanned her with criticism as merciless as it was intent. "She is stupid and sentimental," she said to herself. "What can they have seen in her—those two? She is beautiful, though, or must have been before all this. *Beauté du diable*—just youth, a skin of milk and roses, and that wonderful German luxuriance of hair."

Aloud she said: "You are wondering how I have discovered you, and what I want—is it not so? Well, in the first place, my cousin has returned from India. Ah, you start. Yes, it is of him I wish to speak. He knows all now; but he does not know where you are, and he is full of some wild idea of seeking you in order that he may atone for the past. Now I am going to speak to you quite frankly, and as a woman can only speak to a woman. Of course I know your story—it is very painful—but its pain has not only affected you, it has covered an ancient and noble name with dishonour; its disgrace killed my father, and, owing to his death, I must leave the home I love—for ever. No, do not speak yet, you must hear me first. I do not say that you are to blame altogether, but I do say that it is through you these misfortunes have happened. However, what is done, is done. It is of the future, not of the past that I wish to speak. If my cousin seeks you and finds you, he is determined to make you what you say you believed yourself to be, his wife. Now I tell you that if you allow him to do this, you will be guilty of the worst evil you can inflict upon him. You will ruin his future; you will drag him from the high place his name and fortune have given him as a

right; men will laugh at him, and women will say you have made him your dupe; that you courted only his gold and his name, and called it restitution for the wrong he did you in a boy's heedless folly, and a boy's fleeting passion for a fair face. You will make him a jest and a byword, so that he can never live his life out in honour where all his race have lived it. Of myself, I say nothing; the wrong you have both done to me I can forgive, though never now can I become what I was pledged to be. But this is no question of rivalry. Could the past be undone—had you an innocent name and a life without reproach to give him, I would welcome you gladly as his wife; but you know what you have done—and the world knows it, and will never forget it—never, to the last hour you live. For it is always the woman that it blames, however culpable the man."

The rapid, breathless words ceased; she glanced at the face beside her. It might have been carved out of stone, so still, and hard, and colourless it looked. But, as her own voice ceased, a sudden light flashed into the sombre eyes that lifted their gaze to hers; and calmly and gravely the girl rose to her feet and said with neither haste nor passion: "You need not have taken so much trouble to find me out, only to tell me this: I knew it before ever I saw you. I would not marry your cousin now, though he sought me on his knees throughout the world; though he offered every gift of wealth and rank, which you seem to count as bribes that would tempt me. My own heart told me better than any words of yours what the world would say, but it is not the voice of the world or any human creature that I would heed, if he had only been what I believed him. When I knew who it was that I had loved, my punishment began. He may be of great name, or rank, or honour in the eyes of the world—but in mine he has sunk too low for anything but pity. I was only a child, and with all a child's ignorance and trust, and he did me the deadliest wrong that a man holds in his power. He did it remorselessly and without one regret, without even one word of warning. Do you think that now the offer of his name could

wipe out the stain on mine; could ever, ever give me back the hope, the peace, the innocence he used to such base advantage? I am not clever. I know nothing of that world where you reign, and where he and others like himself can be honoured and forgiven, where error like mine is called criminal. Perhaps, if I possessed its wisdom, your words would not have much effect, for then I should only have thought of what I could gain; not of what I could save others."

Alexis Kenyon listened in wonder, that deepened to reluctant admiration. "No, she is not stupid," she acknowledged in her heart. "But she is unwise. I can never appreciate sacrifices. She believes in romance, and this is what romance has done for her! Will she serve my purpose, I wonder?"

"No doubt," she said at last, "you have been hardly used; but I am glad that you have the good sense to avoid further error. I must tell you, though, that it will need more than a mere resolve on your part to deter my cousin from his project. Have you the courage to put a barrier between yourself and his persuasions? They will be harder to resist than you imagine. He is weak, and ill, and humble; he will appeal to your pity, to your past love. I hardly think you will find strength to say him nay."

Gretchen looked at her wearily; pain and suffering had replaced anger. She felt exhausted, and the sight of this fair, haughty, insolent woman showed her what a wide distance there was between their lives and rule of action.

"You wish me to do something," she said. "What is it?"

For a moment Alexis Kenyon's eyes sought the ground. She felt shamed and silenced by that calm, heroic face, bearing in every line the seal of past suffering, with all its glorious youth crushed and broken down by the agony of endurance. But the momentary softness passed. She had resolved to conquer, and her will was as iron in comparison to Gretchen's.

"It is not a question of what I wish," she said gravely. "It is rather what your heart should dictate. Remember, I know your whole history. I know that

you were destined for conventual life, and that you threw off all obligations without scruple, and from that date began all your misfortunes. Has it never occurred to you that the duty you disregarded had a claim upon you still?"

Gretchen's face paled to the very lips. Here was some one wiser, cleverer even than Sister Maria, echoing Sister Maria's words.

"You think," she said breathlessly, "that my sin demands such an atonement——"

"I think," said Alexis, "that you should go back to your convent. That is the only real barrier you can set up between yourself and further temptation."

The girl shivered as if with sudden cold. Her eyes looked up at the blue sky, and then grew dim and blind with a rush of tears.

"I would sooner die," she cried passionately. "I know I am disgraced and unhappy; but still, to live like that——"

Alexis Kenyon rose with cold and haughty dignity. "I thought," she said, "your heroism would not stand a test. Death does not come at our wish, and words are easy; it is deeds that prove their worth. Well, there is no more to be said. I merely pointed out a plain case of duty. A nobler and less selfish nature would not have needed even that it should be pointed out. I will not detain you any longer."

She was moving away, but a faint call stayed her. She paused and looked back.

Gretchen had sunk down on the seat. The pale suffering of her face looked even more piteous in comparison with the golden warmth and gladness of the young spring day.

"Wait," she called out hoarsely; "you are right. I forgot that I owe you reparation. I must not think of myself. I did you a great wrong, but I did it unconsciously, only that Fate—it is very hard. May I ask counsel of one friend before I decide? He is so wise and noble, he could tell me what was right, and then——"

"No," said Alexis, with sudden passion. "Let your own heart decide. You obeyed its promptings once because they suited your own wishes. If they

clash now, at least you know that duty is often hard because it is right. What friend can tell you more? When you are safe within your retreat, then you can write to any one you choose, and tell them your resolution. Now, the very fact of your seeking other counsel shows that you fear your own weakness."

"It is not that," said Gretchen firmly. "You might believe—you might trust me—I would go anywhere—the further the better; but I no longer hold the faith that makes a convent-life possible. I have forsworn it. Its errors, its bigotry, its cruelty, were all explained by——"

"By Mr. Adrian Lyle! Is it not so?" interrupted Alexis scornfully. "Oh, I know him. He has a fancy for making converts. That need not trouble you. He acts for his Church's principles as your priests do for yours. He will tell you one thing to-day and another to-morrow, if it suits his purpose. His faith differs in no essential point from that which you say you have forsworn. Take my advice, and go back to it. The world has treated you very cruelly; it will only treat you worse the more you cling to it. There are but two refuges where a woman can hide such shame as yours—a convent or a grave. You are too young to hope for the one; but the very injuries you have inflicted on others, the disgrace which clings now and will cling for ever to your name, points to that other, which is still open."

The girl looked at her with ever-deepening wonder. In her simple-heartedness, her intense self-reproach, she only saw that she had inflicted a grievous wrong on this proud and beautiful woman. Her very soul was wrung with an agony of remorse.

"I did not know," she cried brokenly. "I would not have wronged you willingly. I see now why he left me—it was you he loved, and I—I have done you all this harm."

"I have told you," said Alexis coldly, "that it is in your power to make reparation. Why waste more words? You cannot escape his search. I found you, though you deemed yourself safely hidden in this great labyrinth, and so will he find you, though you went to the end of the world. I have put a plain

duty before you; it rests with you to fulfil it nobly, or reject it selfishly."

Gretchen listened and trembled. It did not occur to her to say that her rival had only placed the dagger or the poisoned cup before her; that she was cruel beyond all cruelty when she pointed out as "duty" what was merely a safe and easy way of revenging herself for the faithlessness of one man and the indifference of another. She knew nothing of the real workings of Alexis Kenyon's mind; nothing of the real reasons of her presence here. The passionate generosity of her own nature blinded her to the cold selfishness and the secret jealousy of that other.

A rush of memories, a flood of thoughts held her dumb and troubled; but the force of resolution was slowly working within her, and something of a martyr's courage was in the young, uplifted face, as she turned it at last to the watchful and intent eyes that were bent upon her.

She rose slowly from her seat; the blood seemed cold within her veins, even as she stood there in the warm glow of the sunlight.

"I will do what you desire," she said calmly. "After all, it is the heart that Heaven reads. I can give that to Him, and serve Him under the garb of any faith."

A flash of triumph lit Alexis Kenyon's eyes. She had conquered. The strong will had bent the weaker to its purpose, and now, come what might, neither Neale Kenyon nor Adrian Lyle should hold it in his power to see her ever again.

"You have decided wisely," she said, "and I trust you; but you must act at once—this very day. You had better write and tell this—lady who employs you, that you must give up your duties, and then you can leave London to-night by the Continental express. I will provide you with means; that need not trouble you, and—what is it?"

Some change, some subtle difference in the girl's face caught her eyes.

"My mother," cried Gretchen suddenly. "Oh, I forgot her. What will she do? She loves me so. I am all that she has. It will break her heart if I leave her."

"Your mother?" echoed Alexis. "Is she with you in London?"

"Yes. But she is away all day like myself. She has to work also. Ah, poor mother, how can I tell her? Her heart will break."

"Do not tell her," said Alexis. "Leave it to me. I will break it to her gently and carefully. Then she shall follow you, if you desire. For a year, you know, you will be comparatively free. You can reconcile her to the parting to that time."

The girl looked at her sorrowfully. "You do not know," she said, "how a mother can love. She will not be reconciled. Yes, it is better she should learn the truth from you—a stranger."

"Then," said Alexis rapidly, "I will tell you what to do. Return at once to your lodgings, and put together all you need for your journey. You will go back to Dornbach, will you not? Yes, I thought so. Then come to me here, at my hotel," and she wrote the address on a card from the case she held, "as soon as your preparations are complete. I will myself take you to the station, and see you off. Then I will seek your mother, and tell her what you have decided to do. If she wishes to follow you, she can arrange to give up her rooms; and in two days at furthest you can meet."

Gretchen followed the rapid words; the whole conversation had been in her own language, which Alexis Kenyon spoke fluently. If in her heart a little sense of wonder arose at the trouble this stranger was taking for her, she soon put it aside. The dominance of this new resolution crushed out all other considerations.

It was so plainly her duty; and had not Adrian Lyle told her that the very stamp and hall-mark of duty, was the hardness and difficulty of fulfilling it?

"Arrange it all as you please, Madame," she said, with a resignation that touched Alexis Kenyon with a momentary sense of compassion. "I have said I will do this, and the sooner I do it the better."

"And will you promise," said Alexis sternly, "that, once the Convent gates at Dornbach have closed upon you, you will never betray where you are, by word or sign, to any living creature?"

"Yes," said Gretchen simply. "What use would it be? No one save my mother will want to know where I am."

"You mistake," answered Alexis. "There is one other——"

"Madame," said the girl, with grave and gentle dignity, "I have told you that nothing will ever induce me to see your cousin again, of my own free will. Let that satisfy you."

Alexis Kenyon drew a long, deep breath of relief. "I believe you," she said, "and I trust you. And now, till this afternoon, farewell."

Gretchen bent her head. Her eyes had in them a strange look, the look of a soul that has received its death-wound. The bright sunshine seemed to blind her, the sweet, soft air turned her sick and faint. She had promised to say good-bye to all, to take up that death in life, from which she had once so joyously escaped.

But she could never escape again—never. Those grim gates at Dornbach would close only too surely round her now. Yet why should she care? Life for her was over. It had been brief; and yet it had been a failure, terrible to look upon. Surely it was better to rest her weary heart, and give her tired and struggling soul to the safe keeping of Heaven. Surely——

But a wave of passionate rebellion cut short the compulsory resignation which she had been striving to accomplish.

"It is hard," her heart cried out. "It is as hard as ever. But I think it would have been easier if I could have seen Mr. Lyle just once more—only once."

And a sob rose in her throat, and all the brilliant sky and busy streets grew dark before her eyes.

"He will think me faithless," she thought, "and that all his kind and gentle teaching is lost and valueless; and I can never tell him why I have done this—never. I have given my promise."

And for the first time it seemed to her that that promise had barred the way to a hope too faint for words, but sweet enough to thrill all her pulses with life, and longing, and regrets.

# Book IX.

## CHAPTER I.

### "DREEING HIS WEIRD."

The seasons had come and gone. Spring and summer and autumn and winter had followed each other through the birth and death of a year, and throughout that year Adrian Lyle had worked on steadily and uncomplainingly, winning golden opinions on all sides —the stay and prop of the old Rector, whose health was failing fast—respected and beloved throughout the whole parish for his good deeds and his blameless life. Never did man live more nobly up to the Faith he professed and the lessons he taught. Never did doubting heart or erring soul receive more tender sympathy or more ready aid than from one whose own life was empty, whose own heart ached with a pain well-nigh intolerable.

Day followed day, and night followed night. There was no duty neglected, no trouble shirked; but the burden was not lightened by a shadow's weight, and that one face had never faded from before his aching eyes.

Silence black as night, and bitter as death, reigned between them. He knew nothing of her save that Neale Kenyon's search had been vain, and that, in despair, he had returned to Madras and rejoined his regiment, leaving the search in other hands. The Abbey was shut up, and Alexis Kenyon had gone abroad. Once or twice she had written to him, but his replies had been so brief and so cold that she felt no encouragement had been offered to continue the correspondence.

There had been some talk of her return for Christmas; but the bells had rung their message over the white earth, and he had stood robed and stoled in

the pulpit to deliver those ever-welcome tidings that are new for all time, and he noted there was no one in the Abbey pew yet, and felt almost relieved that that scornful face and those coldly critical eyes were not resting on him as he spoke out the gladness he was so far from feeling.

Indeed, Alexis Kenyon having accomplished her task, and baffled her weak and repentant cousin's generous impulse, felt a certain horror and shame of herself which was as novel as it was unaccountable. Life at the Abbey would have been unendurable, and despite Neale's eager and persistent entreaties, she left it, and went away with Lady Breresford. She felt she could not endure to meet Adrian Lyle, knowing what she knew; and absence—if it taught her nothing else—taught her how blindly she had deceived herself with respect to his regard for her.

It was a blow to her vanity, and it hardened and embittered her more and more; but she had never flinched from truth, and she knew that she never had been and never could be, anything to the one only man who had ever awakened a throb of tenderness in her own heart. When she acknowledged this, she felt a thrill of triumph at the remembrance of her stratagem. At least her rival was safe. She should never have the happiness denied to herself; never even guess that the man whose unselfish friendship and devotion had been so generously offered, had loved and loved her still with all the strength of his noble heart.

It would have been the one drop of sweetness in the girl's bitter cup—the one gleam of brightness amidst the darkness of unending night, and so it was harshly and cruelly denied her.

When Alexis thought of the ignorance and impotence of those three lives, she always felt that cruel thrill of triumph run through her veins. How skilfully she had baffled them, and how easy it had been! The girl had been so helpless and so pliant that she felt nothing for her but contempt. She had for once failed to read between the lines, and recognise the simple heroism underlying that meek consent. "When the year is up," she would murmur to herself.

in insolent security, "I will tell Neale what I have done. I mean to marry him—some day—in spite of all. It would be a pity to lose the Abbey; and when he knows his Quixotic folly is impossible, he will return to his allegiance."

It had not been without a struggle that Adrian Lyle had remained at Medehurst. Often and often had he longed to resign his office, and leave a place grown hateful with so many bitter memories; but one thought restrained him. If Gretchen needed him—if at any time she chose to break that seal of silence, she knew where he could be found. He felt, too, that go where he might, his sorrow would be with him—that though the ocean rolled between their parted lives, his thoughts would bridge the space, and his faithful heart be with her in its hours of mourning, and its nights of sleepless pain. So he waited with what patience he could. At Christmas time he said: "Surely she will send some word or sign," but none came. Then the New Year dawned, and he told himself: "Surely now she will remember." But the days passed, and the month was near its end, and he asked himself, "Had she indeed gone out of his life for ever?"

One night he came home a little later than usual, and more than a little tired. He had walked a long distance to see a farmer's wife whose child was dying. He had done what he could to comfort the sorrow-stricken mother; but he told himself reproachfully that the ring of truth was not in his words; the boldness of belief not in his voice. The coldness and spiritlessness of his own feelings were endangering his powers of expression, and he grew frightened as he thought of the effect that this change might have upon others.

His room looked bright and cheerful. The fire blazed merrily, the kettle sang on the hob. His old landlady bustled in to make his tea and see that he removed his wet boots, for he was sadly self-forgetful in these days. When that was done and she saw him drinking his tea, she suddenly clapped her hand on her pocket, with an exclamation of horror: "Bless me, if I hadn't nearly forgotten! Here, sir, this came for

you an hour or more ago—a furrin telegram, I think. Hope it's no bad news."

He seized it from her hand and tore it open without a word. He saw in a moment it was from Kenyon, and wondered at its length, till he recognised that half the sender's fortune would not have atoned for delay.

It said: "Go to Dornbach—she is to take the veil on the 2nd February. For Heaven's sake prevent it."

That was all. But it was enough to turn Adrian Lyle from a statue into an image of frenzied, breathing, passionate life.

He must go; he must save her at any cost, at any sacrifice! Save her——! Then he stopped, the paper clenched convulsively in his grasp. Save her for another man? Save her, to give love, and joy, and gladness to the selfish and weak-hearted being who had wrecked her youth as wantonly and heedlessly as a child robs a bird of its nest or a butterfly of its bloom? Why should he save her; what claim, what right had Neale Kenyon to demand it? He had suffered cruelly, sorely, at his hands; why should he suffer more?

She had chosen her fate. No one had driven her to it. She had resigned the world, and accepted peace and oblivion in its place. Why should he interfere, or, even if he did, how could he persuade her to listen to his plea or alter her determination?

But the evil moment passed. He sank back on his chair and buried his face upon his arms, and it seemed that, for a brief space, even thought grew still, and a calm, that was like the calm of death, sealed every sense and silenced every doubt. Then he rose, cold, and grave, and stern, with the last glow of youth gone out of his face and the last pulse of hope dead in his heart.

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## CHAPTER II.

### "OF ALL SAD THINGS OF TONGUE OR OF PEN."

"It is bitter weather," grumbled old Lisschen, as she piled wood in the stove and drew the curtains over the shuttered windows; "bitter weather and the

*gnädige Frau* not in; she will kill herself soon. It is always the same. Fretting for the child because she has done the very thing she was always wanted to do. *Um Gotteswillen!* what a strange thing it has been! I thought to help her to happiness; but it seems I did not. Wheu-u-u, how the wind blows to-night! Th e snow must have drifted a foot high in the street. Ah! surely that was a knock!"

She hurried out and into the little hall, and opened the door. No one was there. The snow was piled in heaps about the door. The wind blew in loud, fierce gusts from the hills above

As the old woman stood there a moment, shading her eyes from the heavy falling snow, she saw a solitary pedestrian struggling along up the narrow little street, fighting his way against the elements with a dogged perseverance that called forth her admiration.

"What a night to be out!" she said again with a shiver, and drew back and half-closed the door. Before she could do so, the figure she had been watching was opposite, and the ray of light seemed to attract his notice. In a second he had crossed the intervening space, and was addressing the old woman in fairly good German.

"Will you have the goodness to tell me," he asked, "where the Convent is? I was directed to go up this street and then turn, but whether right or left I could not make out."

"The Convent?" echoed Lisschen in surprise. "Oh, *mein Herr*, that is not much further;" and she gave him the necessary directions, surveying him with undisguised curiosity all the while. "What can he want there?" she thought, and then made a second attempt to close the door; but this time she as suddenly flung it open, for she saw the tall, shrouded figure of her mistress close beside the stranger. He moved aside, but the opening of the door threw the light upon his face, and there came a faint, startled cry from the lips of the veiled woman.

"Mr. Lyle!" she cried. "You! How did you come here?"

He seized her hands.

"Thank God," he said, "that I have met you!

You can tell me the truth. It is not too late, is it? She—she has not taken the veil?"

"Come within," said the trembling woman. "I cannot speak here. Where were you going? Not to the Convent?"

"Yes," he said.

"It would be no use. You would not be admitted at this hour. In fact, I doubt if you can see her at all. To-morrow is the last day of probation."

She had drawn him into her little hall, and the wondering Lisschen closed the door at last upon the storm and darkness of the night. They took off their outer wraps, all white and heavy with snow, and went into the little parlour, and shut the door behind them; but Lisschen's curiosity was so overpowering that she lingered without, and even went so far as to put her ear to the keyhole. What she heard was terrifying enough to make her retreat very rapidly. She got back into her kitchen, shaking more with fear than cold.

"*Lieber Gott im Himmel!*" she ejaculated, dropping the cloaks in a heap on the red-tiled floor, "what a scandal for the place! An English priest coming to take her away! They will never permit it. It cannot be done;" and she crossed herself and looked round in horror, for, though somewhat lax in her duties, Lisschen was a stout Catholic at heart, and doings such as the strange visitor had hinted at, savoured to her of sacrilege.

For more than two hours did the stranger remain with her mistress. Lisschen took them in coffee, and then examined the visitor more closely.

"He looks as if the hand of death were upon him," she said to herself in a sort of awe, as she looked at the lines on the haggard brow, the deep, sunken eyes that had so sad and hopeless a look. "What can he have to do with Gretchen, or the *gnädige Frau* either?"

But her curiosity was not destined to be satisfied that night. She only felt that the hand of trouble was pressing heavily upon her mistress; she only knew that the long, cold, dreary night was spent by her in sleepless pacing to and fro her lonely room.

Quite early in the morning the English visitor

came again, and then he and Anna von Waldstein went out together, and Lisschen knew they must have gone to the Convent.

She grumbled to herself as she went about her work, wondering what they meant to do, and how it could be worth their while to interfere at this late hour with the determination of Gretchen.

Meanwhile, the two about whom she speculated were standing before the gates of the Convent, waiting for admission.

"I cannot promise, as I told you, that you shall see her," Anna von Waldstein whispered hurriedly. "But remember, do not betray your profession, or it will be hopeless. I pray Sister Maria may not see you; she has a long memory, and she has the ear of the Superior. For the present, you are only a friend, and you have come to say farewell. You will remember."

"I shall remember," said Adrian Lyle calmly. In his heart he thought how true were her words; it was indeed farewell that he had come to say.

The door was opened; there was a short colloquy with an old and wrinkled nun, who was the porteress. Then his companion signed to him to follow her, and led him into a small, bare, poorly-furnished room, warmed by the eternal German stove, and lit by a small grated window, which only allowed a glimpse of the sky, all soft and gray now with heavy snow-clouds.

"Wait here," she said, "and I will bring her. As this is her last day of liberty, I hope they will not deny me."

Adrian Lyle said nothing. He felt as if speech were beyond him. A sort of dim wonder was in his mind as to how he had come here. The journey, and all connected with it, looked hazy and indistinct. Mechanically he put his hand to his breast and drew out a crushed and tumbled scrap of paper. It was the telegram Neale Kenyon had sent.

Again he read the words as if he did not know each one by heart. Again he saw that changed and miserable face of the sender, and heard those parting words which he had spoken ere he left the Abbey on that fruitless quest: "Lyle, I will never rest till I

have won her forgiveness; till I have atoned in the only way I can atone for my sin in the past."

And now he must carry this message; he must fight this battle for the absent man, which he could not fight for himself. A strange vengeance truly was this that he was about to take on the only enemy he possessed! He could have laughed aloud at the mockery of human purpose, the futility of human will. What task more undesirable, ay, and what tempting more terrible could have been thrust into his hands?

"Heaven, give me strength!" he cried in his heart. "Give me strength to keep silence to the end!"

While the agony of that prayer still held him, the door softly opened. He lifted his head and looked up.

There was a long, long pause—a pause when meeting eyes spoke as words never could have done, and in the shock and silence of that meeting, realised at last the change that had fallen on either life.

What that realisation was to him he could not have put into any spoken words. It wrung his very soul—it sounded depths of woe that . But the strain was too severe for mortal man. His strength was great, but not great enough for this.

He saw her coming towards him, slowly, uncertainly, like a vision strange and far off, with her face so white and sad, and the soft black folds of her novice's dress falling in straight and simple lines around the slender figure. How slender, how fragile it had grown in this short year!

Nearer she came—nearer. Oh, the piteous eyes; the little trembling mouth that vainly strove to frame some greeting; the outstretched hands that were lifted, only to fall helpless at her side!

Dear Heaven—could mortal strength resist it? As she saw the look that leaped into his eyes, a little cry escaped her, but it was stifled on his breast, and his arms were round her, holding her close—close to that agonised heart. She had no thought to resist. Why should she? She only clung to him like a grieved child sobbing wildly out her joy and sorrow, yet crying piteously, "Oh, why had he come now—why—why?"

He was silent. He held her there for the first—last

time in all his life, so his heart whispered. He knew it; but he had grown weary with the long battle; and what he had read in her eyes only his heart knew—and hers. He looked down on the bright rich hair, flooding his breast with its light. Involuntarily he bent his head and touched one loose soft tress with reverent lips.

"Gretchen," he whispered. "Oh, my poor child—my poor child!"

His voice seemed to recall her to herself. He felt her shiver and strive to draw herself away. He let his arms fall, and drew back a step. "You need not fear me," he said very gently. "I am only here as your brother or—your father—might have been. Can't you look upon me as such? I am old enough and stern enough, Heaven knows."

She looked up with her eyes all drowned in tears; she saw him lift his head and sweep back that loose, thick wave of hair she so well remembered. It was quite white.

A look of fear—of horror came into that intent and sorrowful gaze. "Oh," she cried, "how changed you are! What has done it? What?"

"You, I think!" he said, and laughed bitterly, though he drew his hand across his eyes, where sprang the sudden smart of tears. "Why should I not tell you now? It can do neither harm nor good that you should know. I—I loved you, Gretchen. It was very unwise, was it not? But that has only hurt myself, and what it has cost, that, too, concerns but me—still——"

"Oh, hush," she cried brokenly. "You don't mean it—you can't mean it! You loved me . . me!"

"You," he repeated. "What have you to say against yourself?"

For all answer she drew herself away. Words thronged to her lips, but she could not utter them. She felt stifled and afraid.

"Do not speak," he said, as he saw the struggle in her face. "I will not offend you again . . . For a moment I forgot it was the part of a brother I had to play. Let me tell you what brought me here, and

He drew a sharp, quick breath. His face darkened with sudden dread.

"Do not tell me anything," she implored. "It is quite useless—it is too late. Nothing could alter my resolve now. When—when I have said good-bye to you, my life has won its last desire of earth."

"But you must hear," he said, almost fiercely. "Neale Kenyon has prayed to me to save you for—for his sake. Have you forgotten that you loved him—that he loved you? And now his one hope and thought is to win your forgiveness, to atone for the wrong he once did, to make you his wife as—as you have always held yourself. Gretchen, why do you turn away? Will nothing move you? Won't you listen?"

"I will not listen," she said, "to your pleading for another man. My forgiveness he has had. He did not need to ask it; but for aught else . Mr. Lyle, there is no grave deep enough for forgetfulness of that one month of my life! He never loved me—I was mistaken. I—I could not bear to look upon his face again. That time—that awful time would rise before me, like a grim and mouldering corpse. Between us lies, cold and pale, the body of my dead child! I said before and I say again, there is no resurrection for a love killed as mine was killed, and it is better that this last voluntary act should prove it. He will believe me then, and he will find happiness and forgetfulness too, in a world that no longer holds me."

She stood before him, her hands clasped, her head bowed as if with the weight of that bitter past she had recalled. Every word she had spoken was pain and sweetness both in the ears of the man who heard them. He had fulfilled his mission—it was no fault of his if it had failed.

His silence seemed to trouble her. She looked up, and there was a ring of appeal in her voice as she spoke again.

"Mr. Lyle, I had but half-an-hour to give you; a quarter of that time has sped."

He started.

"Oh," he cried passionately, "you cannot mean

it! you will not do this! It is not too late. Your mother will take you back even now, and, however lonely and sad life is, there will be liberty—friends—hope——"

"Hope!" she echoed wearily, "for me? What kind of hope? Not happiness—that is over; not safety, while temptation lurks on every side; not peace, while a thousand distractions are at hand, and I might learn to forget even Heaven. Mr. Lyle, you must not think I have acted without long and prayerful consideration. Your teachings have not been lost, and I think you know that though I love your faith best, I am not false to it at heart. My life here will be hard; it will be barren; it will be hopeless, so far as all things of earth are concerned; but you, least of any man, should condemn it—knowing what I was, and fearing what I might become; for my heart is very rebellious, and I cannot school it to submission—always——"

"You mean——" he said in that breathless pause, when once again her soul looked back to his in one most sad and yearning gaze.

"I mean," she said, her face growing white and still, "that I might find—danger. I am very weak, Mr. Lyle."

His heart throbbed so wildly, it seemed to him she must hear it. He tried to speak, but the words died off his lips, and he staggered feebly to a chair and hid his face from sight.

As she saw him break down so utterly, her very pity lent her courage. She came to him, and laid one cold and trembling hand upon his arm.

"Listen," she said, "just this once, and I will tell you all that is in my heart and has been for longer than even I myself guessed. I am not a weak girl now, Mr. Lyle, but a woman who has been through the fire of suffering, and who knows good from evil at least. To-day—at this time—in this hour, we stand, you and I, face to face and heart to heart. I read yours, and I feel you read mine. But all the same, you fulfilled your duty as you have fulfilled every duty I have seen you take up. I would not dare to speak to you like

this, only—only it is just as if you stood by my grave, and I could rise and tell you something that would not let me rest. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said brokenly, in that soft pause when the brave young voice faltered and grew faint beneath the strain of thronging tears.

"So it is, that I will hide nothing from you; nothing in this last day of my life as—as you will count life. I can't say—oh, for my own sake I can't say I wish that life had never crossed your own; but for all the pain and suffering I have cost you, it is but right you should know that your great and noble heart has not loved me without return; that I too have known the pain, and the struggle, and have railed at Fate, and even at Heaven, for the cruelty that has marred and spoilt the most perfect and beautiful dream that ever woman dreamt. Don't speak; hear me out, while I have strength—and—and keep your face hidden still; the change in it hurts me more than any reproach. I won't say forget me, not just yet; but I want you to think of me tenderly, regretfully, as of a friend you have lost, and whose life was all a mistake; a friend who loved you very dearly, and would not have given you a moment's pain, could she have helped it; but Fate was too strong for her, and—and——"

She had broken down now, and was sobbing at his feet, and he, all utterly unmanned, could only gaze at her with love unutterable.

"Oh, child," he cried, "you break my heart—you break my heart!"

"And mine," she moaned, "is broken." And suddenly her arms relaxed, and with a shudder she fell forwards, her loosened hair, like a flood of light, sweeping over the bare boards at his feet.

He raised her, white and senseless as a broken lily. He held her to his breast, and with yearning eyes devoured the deathlike beauty of her face. Then reverently, as one may kiss the dead, he kissed the marble brow, the closed eyelids, the soft white lips, the loose rich hair.

"Oh, love," he cried brokenly, "at least in death you are mine, as you are Heaven's."

And he laid her gently down, and with blind eyes and staggering feet he groped his way to the door.

Some one was pacing to and fro the dark and narrow passage. Some one who touched his arm, and gazed pityingly at his face.

"Is it over?" she asked.

He looked at her as one looks at a stranger. It was Anna von Waldstein.

"Yes," he said, "it is over. Go to her. She needs only you now."

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## CHAPTER III.

### "AUF WIEDERSEHEN."

ALL the day the snow fell thick and fast, and from time to time the sound of muffled bells came through the air.

Adrian Lyle had no consciousness of aught beside, as he sat in that little dusky parlour at Dornbach, waiting for Anna von Waldstein's return. How he had reached it he could not have said; but he sat there like a statue, and from time to time old Lisschen crept in and looked at him with frightened eyes, not daring to ask a question, but feeling that something dreadful must have happened.

Whether hours, or days, or weeks, had passed since he had left Gretchen, Adrian Lyle could not have said. He only knew he had had time enough to go over every hour that he had known her from that first night when, in her soft grey dress, she had taken her seat opposite to him at the *table d'hôte* in Venice, to this last day when he had learnt the truth in her last, broken words.

The truth! Had it any comfort for him? Was he one whit the happier for the knowledge? Could it have brought her any nearer to him in the past than it had brought her now? He felt it could not—not while Neale Kenyon lived. Adrian Lyle had far too strong a sense of duty and of honour to have ever attempted to shake Gretchen's allegiance. At any

cost to himself, he would have counselled her to accept Kenyon's atonement, because it seemed to him it was the only right and honourable one for the man who had wronged her to make. But now that he had learnt her secret, and knew that with the fall of her girlish idol had also perished her love, he dimly felt that she had acted wisely in putting this barrier between them. Such a marriage would only have been a mockery—a mere empty form without meaning, and without sanctity.

For himself, what could he say for himself, and for the one drop of sweetness in his bitter cup? He was not thankless, far from it; but he felt it added weight to his heavy burden, it tormented him with a possibility that had never entered his wildest dreams. It taxed to the last capacity the tension of moral strength, and whispered ever and again like a mocking devil at his ear, "Ah fool! fool! what use to deny, and to pray, and to struggle, for a mere breathless abstraction you call 'right'? She is yours now, if you will, and yet you hold back your hand."

He shuddered with an icy chill as he sat there in the dusk; he had not moved since he came in in the morning. It seemed to him that he never could move again. Sense and feeling were numbed, but there was mercy in that dead apathy. He felt that he had touched the very extremity of pain to-day, when he knew she loved him as vainly as he loved her, and had glided from his arms to a living grave. "Save her?" How could he save her? He felt it was impossible. By his own folly, Neale Kenyon had lost her. Why should he pity him? Yet he felt he did; knowing in his heart that after the sweetness, the almost incredulous joy of his own discovery, he could afford to compassionate his rival's loss. Save her! No, he could not save her now. To-night the sun would set upon her grave; to-night the sweet, sad eyes would look their last at all that made life hopeful. For her the tragedy of human existence was over. The curtain would fall on a long, long darkness, and he could only pray in dumb beseechment: "Heaven, send her peace, send her peace!"

There came a sound at last in the quiet house, and a light flashed into the room, and he knew that human sympathy and human pity were doing all for him that woman's gentle ministry could do.

Had he lost consciousness? he wondered. All and everything seemed so far off and indistinct. He struggled to regain sense and feeling. He heard a voice droning out: "*Lieber Gott!* who can wonder? All day long and neither bite nor sup. There was death in his face when he came in, and he has sat there like a stone or a log, never moving nor speaking. Enough to frighten any one, I say."

Something was at his lips, and he drank it mechanically. His brain cleared, he looked up, and met Anna von Waldstein's eyes.

"Forgive me," he said. "I am very foolish. I fasted too long. I—I did not know how the time passed."

"You were indeed foolish, my friend," said the sad-faced woman, seating herself beside him as he lay on the couch. "You must think of yourself. Let the worldly and the frivolous waste their lives, if they like; but not such a man as you."

"You think too well of me," he said wearily. "I am glad you have returned. Tell me . . . "

His voice faltered; but she understood well enough what he would have asked.

"She has quite recovered," she said gently, "and when I left her was calm and tranquil. She will sleep, I trust, for she will need all her strength to-morrow."

"It is to-morrow, then?" he said faintly.

"Yes. I thought once I could not have borne it; but I, too, have grown resigned, and I can see now it is all for the best—all for the best."

"It is easier," he said drearily, "to say that, than to feel it."

"You will feel it in time," she answered with grave tenderness. "You have suffered, I know."

"Yes," he echoed, as he pushed the hair from off his throbbing brow, "I have suffered greatly. Sometimes I wonder why . . . where is the use — the purpose?"

"You have taught it to others—can you not realise it yourself?"

"Not to-night," he said faintly. "No, not to-night. There is nothing in my heart but one bitter sense of loss—a loss cruel as death."

"Yes," she said, "I know. I feared it long ago. I read her heart better than she herself could read it. I think when the knowledge came to her it moved her to take this step. It was the only thing she could do. You will see that yourself some day."

"Did you counsel her to take this step?"

"I? Oh no. I never knew of it until she was safe within the Convent. It was very sudden, her resolve. We were in London, and she had an engagement to teach German, that took her out every morning. One morning she left as usual, then came back and put together all her clothes, and went away without saying anything or leaving any message. I came home at night, and she was gone; but later on came a note, begging me to go to an hotel named, and I should hear of her. I forget now the name. It was a grand and beautiful place, I know; and I went, and there I saw Miss Kenyon."

Adrian Lyle started up. The blood flushed his brow a sudden dusky red.

"She! How could she know anything of her?"

"She knew—everything," answered his companion. "She told me it was the only thing left for Gretchen to do, and that she had advised her to do it, and had given her money and arranged it all. I was furious. You know how proud she is and how haughty. Almost I lost my self-command; but I struggled for calmness, and I did the only thing I could do—I followed my child here. At first I tried to persuade her to alter her determination, but I found it was useless. Miss Kenyon had exacted a promise from her, and she said nothing would induce her to break it Nothing has."

Adrian Lyle buried his face in his hands and groaned aloud. How plainly he saw it all now! Poor child, poor little struggling Gretchen, confronted with this cold and merciless tyrant, who had neither

pity nor mercy in her heart! He felt how every shred of comfort must have been torn away; how the knowledge of shame and misery had been left to eat into her very soul; until the agony had been beyond her strength to bear, and she had fled to the only shelter that had promised refuge and concealment! And it was her own sister who had condemned her to such a fate—her own sister!

How could he tell that a passion, hopeless and cruel as its own force, had burnt in that strange wild heart with a flame fierce enough to destroy all and everything that stood in its way, recking nothing of pain, sorrow, misery, so only the path it trod were clear, and far from even the shadow of a rival.

"Do not grieve," went on his companion presently. "Believe me, if I, her mother, who loved her beyond and above all earth holds, can feel it is best, you too, in time, will acknowledge it also. Not now—not for long, perhaps; but the sting will lose its sharpness, and the pain be lulled to rest. Heaven does not let us suffer for ever; and you will see, as I see now, that your love would only have been a cruel temptation to you both. Remember what you are—you owe a duty to the world that you must not forget; and how could she take her place by your side when her history is known to be one of shame, and every scornful finger is free to point at her as the woman who has stood in a criminal's dock? . . . You will see—you must see what she has seen to-day . . . I but repeat what her own lips said. You could not raise her to your level. The world would not allow it; and though you might be brave enough to despise it and its opinions, a time would come when they would make themselves heard and felt, and then neither she nor you would know a happy hour. For Neale Kenyon it would be different. But you . . you have a blameless past—a great and noble calling. The blast of shame would wither all that was best in you; it is hard now, but it would be a thousand times harder then. Do not think me cold and unpitying to say this. You are the truest, noblest friend that ever man or woman could desire. . . . Heaven alone can

reward you for what you have done for my child and for me; and it will reward you, I am sure. Will you not try and believe it, so that I may take some comfort to her to-morrow—before—before the end comes?"

The brave voice failed and grew uncertain; but the face that looked back to that worn, suffering face of Adrian Lyle's, was calm and hopeful still.

"You are right," he said, "and so was she. Do not think I failed to acknowledge that even when it was most hard."

"And," she asked gently, "what shall I say—for you?"

"Tell her," he said, "that I will bless her and love her till the last hour I live. That life henceforth will own but one hope—the hope that Heaven may grant what earth has forbidden."

A silence, profound as death, followed on those low-breathed words. The sacredness of Death seemed to seal them; and truly naught but Death could ever break the seal.

The next day, at dusk, a veiled woman sought Adrian Lyle's rooms, and placed in his hands a small packet.

He took it and touched it with his lips, as they faltered the one question the livelong day had framed:

"It is—ended?"

"Yes," was the solemn answer. "It is ended. She is vowed to Heaven now."

Once more alone in the dark night—once more alone whilst the Convent bells tolled slowly, solemnly, their mournful truth: "Life begins—Life suffers—Life ends." Once more alone, with his eyes gazing blindly on a long, bright tress of hair telling its own story of a life's sacrifice—bearing on it the last words Gretchen's hands would ever pen to him—"*Auf Wiedersehen!*"

THE END.

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